

“Lead Them or Fall”:  
Examining the Representations of  
Leadership in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*

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# Abstract

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“Lead Them or Fall”:

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Videogames often implicate players in the social process of leadership by frequently casting player-characters in the role of leaders. From starship commanders to city planners, players are often given the power to wield authority and make granular decisions that influence the lives of virtual beings. Despite this, leadership remains an underexplored topic in the game studies field. This thesis addresses this gap by drawing on scholarship from leadership studies and game studies to analyze the representations of leadership embedded in BioWare’s videogame *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. Using a hermeneutic close reading and the game analysis toolkit, it investigates the theme of leadership across 120 hours of gameplay. Through this method, I provide a definition for how to conceptualize and define acts of leadership in videogames to examine how *Dragon Age: Inquisition* constructs opportunities for players to perform actions that are conventionally associated with leadership. The thesis further analyzes the ideologies underpinning what it means to be a leader in this game, examining how these ideas are written into narrative contexts and designed into gameplay mechanics to subjectivize players into becoming “player-leaders.” It will also address the player’s capacity for incorporating alternative leadership practices into their gameplay. By applying leadership theories to an analysis of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, I demonstrate how these lenses offer novel frameworks for scholars to understand and interpret the social dynamics that emerge between players and virtual characters in videogames.

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this thesis to my family. To my father, Mark, for teaching me how to find joy and purpose in the simple things. My mother, Lori, for teaching me how to think critically and express myself through writing. My brother, Dana, for inspiring me every day. My sister, Lena, for helping me to get started on this path. Thank you for your never-ending kindness, support, and passion. You are the leaders I will follow my entire life. I love you!

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## Introduction

A blizzard rages in the night as a shrouded figure struggles through the snow. Magical flames lick at a sword in one of their hands. They raise a shield against the wind in another. A disembodied voice speaks: “For almost a thousand years, the world believed it was in the hands of the Maker.” The scene fades to show the same figure, an unnamed Hero, striding through a valley at the head of a large group of people. “And now many believe you are the agent of his will,” the voice continues. “Whatever the truth is, that belief gives you power.” The Hero rides a horse through an awestruck crowd and consorts with an ally. The image cuts to the Hero on their knees, struggling to stand as a new voice booms and echoes menacingly, “You will resist. You will always resist. It matters not.” Music swells as sparks fly. The Hero fights against monstrous enemies, they rush through a luscious forest with friendly companions flanking their sides and do battle with a vicious fire-breathing dragon. Finally, the Hero stands atop a mountain; nine fierce figures of varying races pose resolutely behind them. One more voice speaks: “Every great war has its heroes. I’m just curious what kind you’ll be.” The music swells again as the words “Dragon Age: Inquisition” appear on screen, the trailer’s tagline slowly revealing itself beneath: “Lead Them or Fall” (*DRAGON AGE™: INQUISITION Official Trailer – The Hero of Thedas*, 2014).

This sequence describes one of the final trailers from the marketing campaign for *Dragon Age: Inquisition (DAI)*. Titled “The Hero of Thedas,” the trailer’s sweeping vistas and voiceover narration promise a story where players will make choices and engage in gameplay mechanics that allow them to rise up as a leader or fall into failure. Importantly, the various narrators only refer to this character as “you,” already positioning the audience of the trailer, the future player, as this heroic figure. Even before the game has started, *DAI* is already identifying the potential



player as a leader and, as such, has begun associating the concept of leadership with certain characteristics. The Hero who is a leader in this trailer is brave, strong, stands at the forefront of a warlike group, and, as one of the speakers describes, wields vast power to determine the fate of the fantasy world. The game's marketing thus communicates a clear message: Play *Dragon Age: Inquisition* and not only will you get to be a powerful magical hero, but you will also be an important leader, one whose moral code you will have the privilege to determine. Through this trailer, and the repetition of the "Lead Them or Fall" tagline,<sup>1</sup> it becomes clear that leadership is a central theme of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*.

Many videogames contain themes of leadership in their stories and mechanics such as the role-playing game franchise *Mass Effect* or the city-building management game *Frostpunk*. As is evident in the trailer described above, these representations present leadership as synonymous with certain attributes, making arguments about what actions constitute the process of leadership and what kind of person is worthy of being a leader. However, the power dynamics that emerge from this positioning of player-characters as leaders have yet to be analyzed and critiqued by game studies scholars. This begs the question: what messages are videogames communicating through their representations of leadership? This thesis answers this question by pursuing a textual analysis of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. It will examine how the game presents its narrative and constructs gameplay mechanics to make players believe that they are inhabiting a leadership role while also critiquing the values and ideological positions that underlie those elements.

### ***Videogames and Leadership***

Protagonists in videogames are typically understood as important figures. In a series of interviews, Muriel and Crawford note that players often engage with videogames out of a desire to experience "power fantasies," with them stepping into virtual worlds "as powerful subjects,

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<sup>1</sup> This tagline appears in other trailers as well as on the back of the box for the game's physical release.

who are able to control the outcome of their actions in ways they could only imagine in their daily lives” (2020 p. 150). In other words, videogame protagonists are characters around which the machinations of the narrative unfold and who can influence the state of the virtual world. In Stephanie Jennings’s terms, many videogames position players as “world-saviors” (2022). This is reinforced when videogames cast players in leadership roles.

Whether they be commanders of armies or heads of communities, videogame protagonists often receive titles and authority befitting a leader. For example, the science fiction series *Mass Effect* places players in the role of a military and diplomatic leader named Commander Shepard. Jennings notes that these games give Commander Shepard unilateral authority to make sweeping decisions, meanwhile, “the galaxy itself has no say in Shepard’s conclusions about the fates of its lives – or whether Shepard is, in fact, who should be making that choice in the first place” (Jennings, 2022, p. 331). This is a common structure in videogames, one that links the concept of leadership to the exercising of power and the authority to make decisions. However, leadership scholars have noted that associating leadership solely with power and authority raises serious ethical implications and have moved away from such simplistic connections (Dugan, 2017). This suggests that videogames’ reliance on power fantasies may lead to authoritarian depictions of agency (Jennings, 2022) and, consequently, leadership.

Many games use statistics to measure the player-character’s growth and ability as a leader. *Dragon Age: Inquisition* associates the protagonist's ability to progress the story with "Power" while *Fable III* keeps track of the player's "Renown" (BioWare, 2014; Lionhead Studios, 2010), but what does it mean for these games to associate the notion of being a "leader" with the accumulation of power or fame? Despite the tendency of developers to implement

themes of leadership in their games, game studies scholars typically address the subject of power in connection with topics such as toxic meritocracy, authoritarian agencies, and neoliberal capitalism's extractive logics (Paul, 2018; Jennings 2022). How these ideas relate specifically to the topic of leadership has yet to be examined, a gap that this project addresses.

To analyze videogame representations of leadership, it is critical to understand what is meant by the term "leadership" and how different perspectives conceptualize and enact its practice. Leadership is often vaguely defined, with Stogdill noting that "There are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept" (Stogdill & Bass, 1981, p.7). Ladkin (2010) claims that this is due to leadership being an inherently socially constructed phenomenon with dynamics that can vary greatly depending on the context and social processes engaged by leaders and followers (p. 32).<sup>2</sup> Conventional understandings of leadership tend to view it as a process of an individual's "command and control" where the leader holds power to direct others, emphasizing hierarchy and positional authority (Maier, 2014, p. 100-101). Such approaches understand leadership as the process of optimizing efficiency to achieve desired outcomes. Leadership studies, however, has turned away from this "classical" view that leadership is management, "with functions such as planning, organizing, leading and controlling" (Biehl, 2021, p. 2). Scholarship in the field now tends to view leadership as a relational and processual practice engaged with "sense-making, motivation, and influence" (Biehl, 2021a, p. 3), attending to the development of more ethical and equitable relationships. Even so, this perspective, often understood under the label of "postindustrial leadership" (Rost, 1991, p. 102), can still lead to problematic depictions of leadership as an individualistic endeavor that manifests unequal power dynamics (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012;

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<sup>2</sup> Various formal definitions and models developed by leadership studies researchers will be discussed at greater length throughout this thesis.

Chandler & Kirsch, 2018). As such, the practical applications of this newer paradigm should still be reflexively examined and critiqued.

This thesis engages such a critique by drawing on critical leadership studies (CLS), a growing academic movement within the broader field of leadership studies. CLS research disrupts the dominant narrative of leadership theory to identify the social stratification and unbalanced power dynamics that can emerge from uncritical associations of leadership with hierarchy and management (Dugan, 2017, p. xvii). Influenced by the traditions of feminism, postcolonial studies, and numerous other critical theories, CLS critiques the themes of “meritocracy, objectivity, and neutrality” that persist as “mainstays of leadership discourse” even in postindustrial approaches to the concept (Chandler & Kirsch, 2018, p. 311). The goal of this research is to reconstruct an “alternative vision” of leadership that promotes human flourishing free of oppressive power dynamics (Chandler & Kirsch, 2018, p. 308). This is reflected in the essence of this thesis which names, describes, and examines the leadership theories presented in the context of videogames by critically deconstructing the values and ideological worldviews that they support. This endeavor bridges critical leadership studies and game studies to examine the representations of leadership in a case study of the videogame *Dragon Age: Inquisition*.

### ***Dragon Age: Inquisition***

*Dragon Age: Inquisition (DAI)* is an ideal initial case study for several reasons, the primary being its extensive engagement with the theme of leadership. In *DAI*, the leader role of the player-character corresponds to that of the Inquisitor, leader of the Inquisition, a political and religious organization seeking to save the fantasy world of Thedas from a nefarious force that threatens to destroy the world (BioWare, 2014). The game was lauded upon release for its many elements that allowed players to engage in leadership actions, such as the “Power” system being

integrated into side quests or the involvement of the Inquisitor in decision-making that affected the political landscape of the game world (Cobbett, 2015; Sliwinski, 2014; VanOrd, 2014).

Game critic Noah Caldwell-Gervais emphasized this aspect, stating that

While previous BioWare titles are fantastic at showing the arc of your hero and their adventuring party growing from relatively unknowns to movers and shakers in the first degree, BioWare's never really tried it with a whole organization before, but *Inquisition* absolutely nails it. It's another one of their absolutely primary design focuses, showing how one hand guides the many over time as your influence expands (2014).

Leadership is clearly a core concern in both the game's narrative as well as its gameplay mechanics, providing the opportunity for this thesis to explore an intricately designed depiction of the concept.

*DAI* is also a popular game released by BioWare, a high-profile AAA development studio. BioWare has a history of developing celebrated role-playing games (RPGs) that often depict heroic world-saviors who occupy leadership roles. This was especially pronounced in their *Mass Effect* series with *Dragon Age: Inquisition's* further iteration and refinement of this theme resulting in the significant critical acclaim previously mentioned. *DAI* won the "Game of the Year" award at the inaugural Game Awards ceremony in 2014 along with receiving similar accolades from numerous other journalistic outlets. The game also sold over 6 million copies and was BioWare's fastest selling game when it was released (Radić, 2021), revealing a popularity with the public that extended beyond the warm reception from critics. These elements ensure that *DAI's* representation of leadership is highly visible, making it a useful case study for establishing a baseline understanding of how videogames can communicate messages about leadership to players.

*Dragon Age: Inquisition* also occupies a prominent space in the field of game studies. In particular, the game's representations of LGBTQ+ characters and relationships are frequently analyzed and discussed (Collins, 2020; Østby, 2016; Pelurson, 2018). BioWare games as a whole have also been critiqued by numerous scholars to elucidate the studio's unique approach to developing narratives (Jørgensen, 2010) as well as to identify the ideologies underlying the mechanics and narratives that the studio often iterates upon with each new game (Voorhees, 2012; Patterson, 2015). This wealth of both popular criticism and scholarly research provides a foundation of analysis that this thesis will extend by integrating the lenses of leadership theory into a textual analysis of *DAI*.

As a result of these elements, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* offers rich insights into my three central research questions:

RQ1: What does “leadership” mean in a videogame context and how are players subjectivized into being a “player-leader” through a game's narrative contexts and gameplay mechanics?

RQ2: What ideologies and values underlie, motivate, and contribute to these methods and the creation of the player-leader subject?

RQ3: Do videogames allow players to experiment with adopting varied leadership styles or determining their own approach to leadership?

Through investigating these questions, this project will demonstrate that leadership roles in videogames are not merely power fantasies that allow players to feel like they have agency in a virtual world, but designed positionalities that contain embedded values and ideologies.

### ***Organization of Chapters***

This thesis integrates the frameworks of both leadership studies and game studies to perform a textual analysis of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. Chapter 1 provides the groundwork for this analysis by presenting an overview of the theoretical frameworks that emerge from both disciplines. It discusses the concept of leadership and outlines the principles of critical leadership studies in greater depth before clarifying some of the core historical and ongoing debates within the field at large. The chapter expands on the terminology and conceptual models that are core to conducting textual analyses of videogames. In particular, it identifies that videogames subjectivize players into assuming a particular subject position that influences their “way of being” (Vella, 2021) in relation to the game world. Here, I advance the concept of the “player-leader” to address how certain themes and mechanics will subjectivize players into understanding their in-game actions as acts of leadership.

Chapter 2 outlines the methodology that facilitated the analysis of *DAI*. This project utilizes Consalvo & Dutton’s (2006) Game Analysis Toolkit framework in conjunction with the guidelines developed by Theresa Tanenbaum (2015) for performing “close readings” of games. I then reflect on my positionality in relation to the topic of leadership and the performative identities I engaged to study *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. The chapter concludes by identifying the formal leadership theories that provide vocabularies to understand and interpret the leadership dynamics of *DAI*: trait theory, leader-member exchange theory, and servant-leadership.

Chapter 3 acknowledges that scholars should address how the specific affordances of any given medium influence the representations of leadership that emerge from that medium. Following a brief overview on the concept of agency in games, I offer a description for how to conceptualize acts of leadership in games as distinct from other gameplay actions. This player-leader heuristic addresses the qualities of leadership in games as well as the characteristics of the

player-leader subjectivity, elucidating how these elements reflect the theoretical frameworks of both leadership studies and game studies. The chapter then discusses this heuristic in the context of several brief examples that illustrate the usefulness of the player-leader heuristic, laying the foundation for an analysis of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*.

Moving to the case study, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* is an elaborate game with numerous intersecting systems, some of which contribute seemingly contradictory messages about the nature of leadership. This complexity is organized into four case study chapters that build on one another until the full context of the leadership situation in the game is made clear. Chapter 4 begins the analysis by summarizing the central narrative of *DAI*. This chapter explores how the game's story contextualizes the player-character as a leader. It elucidates how the fictional context of the game positions the player-character as someone who possesses a set of traits that predisposes them to be a successful leader. This discussion is supported by a more detailed description of trait theory's history and framework, identifying its conventional value of individualism and how that value manifests in *DAI*'s narrative.

Chapter 5 shifts the focus of analysis away from the individual player-character and onto the organization that they represent: the Inquisition. Power and Influence are two in-game systems that measure the growth of the Inquisition as a whole. These systems are connected to the War Table, a central mechanic that renders the Inquisition's size visible and tangible by allowing players to delegate tasks to NPC advisors. While these systems are essential for representing the Inquisition as a community to which the player is accountable, engagement with these systems does not correlate to any of the formal leadership theories researched for this project, instead reinscribing conventional leadership processes that are aligned with the values of hierarchy and authority.



Chapter 6 focuses on how *DAI* constructs leader-follower relationships between the Inquisitor and their non-player controlled companions. This chapter provides an analysis of the relational behaviors that are available to players, discussing how the dialogue mechanic and companion Approval system weave together to construct leadership as a relational influence process that occurs within dyadic connections. These connections are analyzed using the model of leader-member exchange theory, one of the first leadership theories to present leader-follower relationships as dyadic connections.

The analysis chapters conclude with a consideration for the player's ability to intervene in the leadership representations of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. Focusing on this project's third research question, Chapter 7 identifies the player's own affordances for embodying leadership values that may not be intended by the game's design. This chapter is not meant to describe how actual players approach this process but identify the spaces of possibility in which the player is capable of determining their own style of leadership rather than merely selecting from the game's predefined options.

Finally, the conclusion of this thesis summarizes the key findings of the analysis as well as the contributions it makes to both game studies and leadership studies. It also acknowledges the project's limitations and addresses the potential for future research to expand on its conclusions and further integrate the two disciplines. This analysis will demonstrate that the binary simplicity of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*'s "Lead Them or Fall" tagline elides the complex reality of leadership, a complexity that is explicated and explored throughout this thesis.

# Chapter 1 - Literature Review

Analyzing the representation of leadership in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* requires an overview of the theoretical terrain for two fields: leadership studies and game studies. This chapter addresses the often vaguely defined concept of leadership by providing historical context for developments in the leadership studies field, summarizing ongoing debates such as the relative power of leaders and followers, and elucidating the theoretical frameworks that underpin formal leadership practice to clarify what is described by the term “leadership.” It applies these perspectives to the medium of videogames, cultural artifacts that convey meaning through robust mechanisms and intriguing narratives. By analyzing these elements, we can examine how *Dragon Age: Inquisition* represents behaviors, responsibilities, and values associated with leadership, allowing players of the game to believe they are acting as a leader within a virtual world.

As the central case study, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* necessitates its own considerations. This game emerges from the tradition of the role-playing game (RPG), carrying with it the logics of a genre that is often inclined toward depicting individualistic neoliberal values (Baerg, 2012; Giroux, 2011). Yet, *DAI* also exists within the lineage of its developer’s history. BioWare, the studio that developed *DAI*, has released many games that received critical acclaim for their complex narratives in which players interact with compelling non-player characters (NPCs). BioWare RPGs therefore typically afford players a variety of opportunities to interact with the virtual game world through dialogue, opening the possibility to examine how players can engage in relational leadership processes.

Considering this theoretical context, we can identify numerous overlaps between the values of leadership studies and game studies, including a concern for the latent individualism

and dubious ethics that underlie the objects of study for both fields. In this way, leadership and game studies are compatible disciplines. This literature review forms the foundation that will be used to conduct an analysis of the in-game affordances and contexts by which *Dragon Age: Inquisition* subjectivizes players into assuming a subjectivity termed the “player-leader,” thereby examining how the game communicates ideological values related to leadership to the player.

### ***Leadership Conceptions***

From world politics to organizational life to social activism, leadership is a central “social myth” of our contemporary world, viewed by many as a “catch-all solution for nearly any problem, irrespective of context” (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012, p. 367-368). In appearing as this “social myth,” there tends to be a lack of definitional certainty surrounding what “leadership” is and how it appears. Many scholars hesitate to offer one singular definition of leadership due to the numerous perspectives that can influence one’s leadership approach (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012). Indeed, definitions that do appear often differ significantly in the values and processes that they emphasize.

This is further complicated by the fact that conceptions of leadership evolve over time. Joseph Rost (1991) acknowledges this by identifying a paradigm shift that occurred in 1978 when leadership studies began changing from “industrial” to “postindustrial” approaches. As described by Rost (1991), industrial leadership was “management oriented, personalistic in focusing only on the leader, goal-achievement dominated, self-interested and individualistic in outlook, male-oriented, utilitarian and materialistic in ethical perspective, and rationalistic, technocratic, linear, quantitative, and scientific in language and methodology” (p. 27). In contrast, Rost (1991) claims that postindustrial leadership manifests as “influence relationships between leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes,” a

description that deemphasizes the hierarchical authority of the leader position and centers a concern with mutual development (p. 102, 104). This description of postindustrial leadership contains elements that align with many contemporary approaches to the concept.

While such a change is largely reflected in scholarly understandings of leadership, some details of this shift have been questioned by researchers. John Dugan (2017) asserts that Rost's timing of the 1978 turning point elides how different leadership contexts implemented more communal forms of leadership prior to that date (p. 65). This omission ignores the leadership practices of various global contexts and the approaches of social activist movements. Consequently, Rost's paradigm shift constructs a narrative that is easy to understand while also presenting an unnamed bias toward the leadership theories developed by researchers in the United States (Dugan, 2017, p. 63). Furthermore, although scholars have shifted to supporting practices that align with the overall description of postindustrial leadership, the "materialistic" and "goal-achievement dominated" values of the industrial leadership paradigm remain in certain organizational structures such as military hierarchy and dense bureaucracies. Rost's paradigm shift is therefore less useful for the specific timing it identifies and more for its acknowledgement that cultural approaches to leadership change and evolve. It provides useful descriptions of two different paradigms that have been, and in many cases continue to be, in tension with one another while also serving as an example of why we must be critical of the narratives that are constructed about leadership. This critically reflexive perspective is central to the growing movement of critical leadership studies (CLS).

### ***Critical Leadership Studies***

In many ways, industrial leadership represents a conventional approach to leadership that emphasizes hierarchy and positional authority, perspectives that leadership studies has largely

turned away from. Expanding on Rost's view of postindustrial leadership, scholarship in the field now tends to view leadership as a relational and processual practice engaged with "sense-making, motivation, and influence" (Biehl, 2021a, p. 3; Uhl-Bien, et al. 2014; Yukl, 2010). This is illustrated by the definition provided in Peter Northouse's (2022) book, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*: "Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (p. 47). As a starting point, this seems to be commonsensical and clear. In defining leadership as a process, Northouse does avoid conceptualizing leadership as a quality or trait held by an individual. The vagueness of the "individual" also does not conflate leadership with hierarchy; the "individual" exerting influence could technically be a "follower" in terms of hierarchical position. However, further consideration reveals that this definition carries implicit values such as an emphasis on individuals as well as focus on achieving outcomes rather than collective processes or ethical concerns. Thus, in its simplicity, Northouse's definition serves as a basis for understanding leadership as something distinct from other social processes even while it also carries a set of assumptions that should be examined.

The field of critical leadership studies endeavors to deconstruct such assumptions that have permeated the discourse surrounding leadership and its practice. Critical leadership studies draws on the traditions of feminism, cultural studies, and other critical disciplines to acknowledge leadership as a socially constructed phenomenon and critique the power dynamics that often go unaddressed in mainstream leadership writing (Collinson, 2011). In the words of Chandler and Kirsch (2018), "any sufficiently critical examination of leadership as a process in organizations must grapple with and work to overcome the myths of meritocracy, objectivity, and neutrality to see the underlying relations of domination" (p. 312). In many ways, CLS aims to destabilize the very notion of leadership, viewing the concept and its associated logics as a

way for hegemonic powers to legitimate and maintain their authority. This thesis aligns with Alvesson & Spicer's argument that, though leadership can connote a set of destructively asymmetrical power relationships, it remains a valuable concept for understanding the social processes through which work in organizations and groups gets done (2012). There is power in the idea of leadership, and perhaps that power can be used productively. Through this perspective, CLS scholars seek to rework and reconstruct the discourse of leadership to "create and support successful ethical frameworks" (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012, p. 368). In doing so, much of critical leadership studies focuses on the theoretical and ideological grounding from which definitions of leadership emerge.

Alvesson & Spicer (2012) assert that three theoretical clusters have underpinned the study of leadership: functionalist, interpretive and critical, offering an additional fourth which they term "critical performativity" (p. 370). Functionalist approaches correspond to a type of positivism, understanding leadership as an "objective phenomenon" focused on improving systems functioning through scientific inquiry. Interpretive assumptions, on the other hand, view leadership as "socially constructed through actors beginning to 'see' a set of activities as leadership." Critical understandings of leadership assume the socially constructed nature of the phenomenon, but they also go further by "examining the patterns of power and domination associated with leadership, and relate it to broader ideological and institutional conditions." The authors go on to offer the concept of "critical performativity" as a recognition of the need to critique systems of oppression at play in the exercising of power relationships, while simultaneously affirming the potential to generate new ways of understanding the practice of leadership that refute such imbalances of power (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012, p. 370, 372-373 & 376). Scholars have moved away from viewing leadership through a positivist lens and it is

commonly understood today as a phenomenon that is socially cocreated (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Uhl-Bien, et al., 2014), opening the door to many diverse approaches and practices.

Despite this movement toward a more critical understanding of leadership within scholarly research, the practical application of leadership can vary greatly depending on context. Dugan (2017) points out that “formal [leadership] theories will vacillate in their emphases on leaders, their roles, and their development versus leadership as a process, how it unfolds, and collective development” (p. 18).<sup>3</sup> Donna Ladkin (2010) claims that this variation is due to leadership’s inherently contextual nature:

leadership arises out of different and specific social constructions. Sometimes it can look forceful and outspoken and other times it is appreciated for its steady ability to hold a psychological space in which dialogue between people who hold vastly different views can safely occur...Each theory provides another ‘piece of the leadership puzzle’. By considering leadership through the lens of phenomenology, we can appreciate that there will be as many different descriptions of leadership as there are situations in which it arises (p. 32).

Such considerations reveal that leadership theories and models do not necessarily express truths about what is effective or just leadership. Rather, as Ladkin (2010) indicates, they are lenses that focus attention on specific aspects of the leadership process (p. 32). They are thus descriptive heuristics for understanding the social relationships that emerge from collaborative contexts. These frameworks shape leadership practice not by describing an objective reality, but by giving entities a vocabulary and mental model through which they can interpret and approach the complex contextual reality of leadership.

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<sup>3</sup> A more in-depth discussion of different leadership models and theories appears later in this chapter as well as in Chapter 2: Methodology.

Through their varying emphases, these models contain implicit judgments about the values and behaviors that are emblematic of leadership and, as a result, can communicate vastly different worldviews and values. Such a disparity can also be observed in the worldviews underlying the leadership frameworks of various cultures, such as the communal emphasis present in indigenous cultures (Cajete, 2015) and the African idea of “ubuntu” which roughly translates to “I am because you are” (Rego, et al. 2019, p. 246). Although leadership is a slippery, almost illusory concept, this diversity of perspectives offers a rich field from which to examine the leadership values and worldviews that are embedded in the media we consume.

### ***Leadership Studies: Definitions***

In addition to the variety of perspectives that surface from distinct theoretical and cultural positions, the difficulty of defining leadership also stems from its connection to many other loosely defined concepts such as power, authority, and influence. Peter Northouse (2022) defines power as “the capacity or potential to influence” (p. 52). Drawing on French and Raven’s 1959 study of the different manifestations of power, Northouse (2022) identifies that the concept can be categorized into two “major kinds of power”: position and personal power (p. 52, 55). Position power is understood as the “power a person derives from a particular office or rank in a formal organizational system,” whereas personal power is “the influence capacity a leader derives from being seen by followers as likable and knowledgeable” (Northouse, 2022, p. 56). Position power corresponds to what many understand as “authority,” a concept that is often “framed as the *right* to direct others in the pursuit of a specified and typically shared, outcome and is often tied to management or a positional role” (Dugan, 2017, p. 20). Meanwhile, personal power links with conceptions of leadership in which influence appears in a less unilateral process of sensemaking. Sensemaking in this context refers to the process of influence that occurs when



leaders and followers negotiate interpretations of environments, events, and experiences to assign meaning to them (Dugan, 2017, p. 289; Ladkin, 2010; Weick, 1995). In other words, power does not have to be tied to an authoritative role, and, especially in terms of personal power, leadership can emerge without corresponding to a specified “leader” position.

One critical element that emerges in this consideration, and leadership studies at large, is the tension between leadership and management. For decades now, leadership studies scholars have drawn a distinction between processes of management and processes of leadership. Bennis and Nanus assert that “to manage means ‘to bring about, to accomplish, to have charge of or responsibility for, to conduct.’ ‘Leading’ is ‘influencing, guiding in direction, course, action, opinion’” (Bennis & Nanus, 2007 p. 20). Northouse summarizes such a view by noting that management entails accomplishing activities and mastering routines whereas leadership involves pursuing growth and change (2022, p. 63-64). In Alvesson and Spicer’s view (2012), management is characterized by “controlling through structures, procedures, and rules” (p. 368). In contrast to the instrumental and task-focused processes of management, leadership is concerned with the meaning-making processes that emerge in the interactions between leaders and followers (Alvesson & Spicer, 2014, p. 42; Ladkin, 2010, p. 104). Leadership is thus conceived as innovative and personable, leading Alvesson & Spicer to caution that the growth and spread of leadership as a “panacea for social ills” may “only indicate an interest in re-labelling managerial work to make it sound more fashionable and impressive” (2012, p. 368). Indeed, the description of leadership as an influence process that often involves “growth” and “change” sounds much more impressive than management’s “structural control.”

And yet, leadership scholars caution against purely negative views of management. Dugan asserts that, although management may be insufficient for “addressing the complex

social, political, and scientific issues that require leadership in society,” it should not be denigrated as a lesser form of leadership. Rather, it is a “necessary tool” for performing “the social coordination of people and tasks” (2017, p. 145). Furthermore, Alvesson & Spicer claim that it is difficult to distinguish “pure” forms of management and leadership, as they often each contain elements of the other (Alvesson & Spicer, 2014, p. 42). Management can be an overused process of control, as in dense bureaucracies (Northouse, 2022, p. 63), but its emphasis on structure and coordination can also support the meaning-making and change-oriented endeavors of leadership.

The need to provide clarity of terms extends to the roles of leaders and followers themselves. Conventional views of leadership tend to understand the concepts of “leader” and “follower” in a binary opposition (Collinson, 2011, p. 188). This logic states that leaders lead and followers follow, representing fixed or static roles. This dichotomy is a false one that often generates imbalanced power dynamics in which leaders are presented as holding unilateral authority to direct or influence their followers (Dugan, 2017, p. 18). In truth, leader and follower identities are socially constructed and therefore capable of dynamically shifting as contexts change (DeRue & Ashford, 2010 p. 628; Ospina et al., 2020, p. 448). As a result, deconstructing this false binary is a particular focus of critical leadership studies scholars.

This positioning of leaders as people who hold authority and wield influence and followers as passive recipients of that influence was common throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and has since received significant criticism (Collinson, 2011, p. 182; Hollander, 1992; Meindl, 1995; Shamir, 2007, p. x). As Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) note, such an emphasis on leaders as “power-wielding actors who affect group and organizational outcomes” has led to a majority of research and discussion on the topic taking a “leader-centric” approach (p. 84). Leader-centric

approaches are those that “conceive of leaders as the motivating entity that moves or directs followers to action” (Uhl-Bien et al. 2014, p.84). Essentially, leader-centric perspectives romanticize individual leaders (Meindl et al., 1985), overattributing organizational successes and failures to the actions of figures who hold positional authority rather than attending to a group’s social processes.

To counter this leader-centrism, various scholars have advocated for “follower-centric” perspectives. These approaches understand that leadership is a “process that is co-created in social and relational interactions between people. In this process, leadership can only occur if there is followership—without followers and following behaviors there is no leadership” (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 83). This construes leadership and followership as interdependent social processes that emerge from specific contexts and sites of interaction. In advancing the notion of “followership theory,” Uhl-Bien et al. emphasize this malleable social nature, pointing out that leaders and followers undergo a “reciprocal identity ‘claiming’ and ‘granting’ process. Claiming occurs when an individual or individuals ascertain identity as either a leader or a follower. Granting occurs when others bestow the claimed identity and claim their own identity in support of the other” (Uhl-Bien, et al., 2014, p. 94). This relational perspective untethers leadership and followership from the traditional confines of positional role authority, leaving it to people in context to establish leadership dynamics, processes, and relationships.

Advocating for this view of leadership is problematized by the conventionally negative connotations of the word “follower” and the positive connotations associated with “leader” (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Our society prizes leadership while subordinating the idea of following, connotations that can lead to understanding the two roles as mutually exclusive (Ospina et al., 2020, p. 448). As Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) have identified,

however, this is far from the case. Followers can exert significant agency within organizations through their potential for dissent and resistance (Collinson, 2011, p. 182; Hollander, 1992). Northouse acknowledges that, though power is often understood as synonymous with leadership, followers have access to wielding forms of personal power as well (2022, p. 52). Contrary to conventional connotations, followers are not passive recipients of a leader's influence, but active entities who wield agency in the co-creation of the leadership process and hold power in determining the direction and outcomes of that process.

While many scholars seek to rehabilitate these images of the leader/follower roles, there are those who take a more skeptical position. Learmonth and Morrell are critical of these terms, suggesting that the leader-follower dynamic cannot be rehabilitated, and will always be used to employ a hierarchy in which "leaders" are able to assert their own power (2016). Chandler and Kirsch (2018) continue this critique, identifying that functionalist approaches to leadership do maintain a much more rigid hierarchy, but there remains a danger that critical leadership studies can reinscribe systems of inequality by continuing to use the same semantic construct of the leader-follower relationship (p. 309-310). If the concrete structures governing those relationships are not themselves changed, then modifying our understanding of the language is likely to be "merely cosmetic" (Chandler & Kirsch, 2018, p. 310). Followers and followership are critical components of leadership, but they inherently generate a set of weighted values. Numerous sources question these presumed values, but the weight of those values makes it difficult to fully disentangle the terms from their cultural connotations.

The questioning of the leader-follower paradigm is an essential pursuit in leadership studies; however, this thesis will continue to use those terms to explore how the ideology and values of leadership within *Dragon Age: Inquisition* subvert or reinscribe their conventional

relationships, attending to the power dynamics that emerge between players and the virtual world they inhabit. As such, this project understands followers not simply as entities who hold a subordinate position in relation to a leader. Rather, they are actors who engage in the process of followership, a set of social processes that involve “recognizing and granting legitimacy to another’s influence attempt or status” (Uhl-Bien, 2014, p. 96). Consequently, when this thesis refers to entities as “followers,” such a statement is not a designation of their positional role, but a recognition that they are entities who perform followership behaviors. Followers are active agents who can defer to a person’s influence attempt, dissent from authority, or otherwise negotiate the social relationships that emerge in leader-follower dynamics (Collinson, 2011; DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Like leadership, this focus on process emphasizes how leader and follower identities are fluid, with positional leaders able to enact followership behaviors and positional followers holding the power to wield influence.

### ***Theories of Leadership***

The study of leadership has led to the creation of dozens of theories and models. Formal approaches to leadership that emerged in the early-mid 1900s tended to conform to a functionalist approach, understanding leadership as a process of “command and control” that could be optimized to improve a group’s production or effectiveness with a leader-centric view (Dugan, 2017 p. 238). Some examples include behavioral (style) theory which emerged from studies conducted by researchers at Ohio State University, as well as Robert House’s conception of path-goal theory (Northouse, 2022, p. 175 & 258). These were prescriptive models that claimed specific types of leader actions would be most effective at galvanizing followers when performed at predetermined points of a team’s development, suggesting optimal methods for leaders to maximize results. Through this lens, leadership was conceived as an objective set of

actions that, when performed, would produce desired outcomes. Such perspectives have fallen out of favor, with path-goal theory's conceptual weaknesses leading it to be largely abandoned by leadership studies research (Yukl, 2010, p. 232-233). Meanwhile, behavioral theory's organization of leadership behaviors into two meta-categories of "task-behaviors" and "relational behaviors" proved empirically useful and would influence future models even as the overall theory itself declined in prevalence (Dugan, 2017, p. 124). These cases indicate that leadership theories can be evaluated as overly simplistic or unhelpful for research endeavors as scholarly interests and cultural values develop, but theories can also change alongside shifting leadership paradigms.

Trait theory serves as one example. In its original conception, trait theory grew out of the "great man" theory's assumption that effective social, political, and military leaders were born with innate attributes that made them "successful" leaders. Accordingly, trait theory was built around a functionalist research perspective that endeavored to identify the "universal" set of traits that would clearly delineate leaders from followers (Northouse, 2022 p. 80). Such an approach reifies leader-centricity and clearly clashes with contemporary understandings of the fluidity of leader and follower roles.

The development of paradigms that privileged the situational factors surrounding leadership would eventually lead scholars to discount trait theory's original myopic focus on the individual leader (Day & Zaccaro, 2007, p. 389-390). And yet, trait theory has continually evolved since its inception, adopting a consideration for context that hypothesizes leaders with different traits will be most suitable to different leadership situations (Zaccaro, 2012). CLS scholars continue to be skeptical of the leader-centricity that remains at the heart of trait theory, but the theory's evolution has ensured that its logics persist in popular writing on leadership as

well as in some academic spaces (Dugan, 2017, p. 88; Zaccaro et al., 2018). As cultural and theoretical approaches to the concept of leadership change over time, these shifting paradigms influence the development of leadership models with some theories falling into irrelevance while others, like trait theory, evolve and continue to be discussed.

Broadly speaking, leadership studies research has moved toward the social constructionism of interpretive and critical perspectives rather than the positivism of functionalist interpretations. In this light, scholars might argue that leader-centric models “work” in the sense that they can be applied to produce outcomes, but their application also generates unethical power dynamics that reinforce hegemonic structures and should therefore not be practiced in favor of more democratic approaches (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012, p. 368; Dugan, 2017, p. 125; Chandler & Kirsch, 2018, p. 308). As a result, “power-over” models like path-goal, behavior, and trait theory have been largely rejected by CLS researchers, giving way to theories predicated on a social constructionist “power-with” model of cocreation and mutual exchange (Biehl, 2021a, p. 68). Examples of these theories include discursive leadership, shared leadership, and complexity leadership theory which shift focus away from individual entities and toward the systems in which those entities are enmeshed (Ospina et al., 2020; Uhl-Bien, 2021). Such models can be understood under the umbrella of “postheroic leadership,” a paradigm that approaches leadership “as a set of shared practices that can and should be enacted by people at all levels” (Fletcher, 2004, p. 648). In this perspective, leadership is a process that involves a multitude of actors performing leadership through actions that “are directed not only downwards but also sideways and upwards in the organizational hierarchy” (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012, p. 377). The frameworks and values presented by these philosophies ground the development of new leadership models and theories directed at improving the ethical and practical engagement

of leadership behaviors, many of which reject the conventional values of leader-centric command and control.

Servant-leadership is one such philosophy advanced to challenge the conventional priorities of leadership, and it exemplifies the importance of considering the context of leadership practice. Servant-leadership posits that the goal of leadership is not to achieve productive outcomes, but to provide support for followers to self-actualize into becoming leaders themselves (Greenleaf, 2008, p. 15). Mark Maier's (2014) view on servant-leadership attempts to dissolve the conventional hierarchy of the leader-follower relationship, viewing a team as a "web of relationships, of which the titular leader is one player, but not the dominant one" (p. 108). Aligning with the tenets of postheroic leadership and followership theory, servant-leadership does not view power as being vested in a singular individual due to their position. Rather, it suggests a more egalitarian view where "followers" themselves act as leaders, and leadership is understood as a stance directed toward action rather than a quality possessed by someone.

This philosophy is, unfortunately, not always successful in eliminating the leader-follower dichotomy or in resolving tensions with authority and power. Although Dugan notes that servant-leadership contributes the core value of social responsibility to the process of leadership, the philosophy's origins in Robert Greenleaf's subjective interpretation of Hermann Hesse's *Journey to the East* leaves the theory open to appropriation by more paternalistic interpretations. Such approaches can revive the leader-centricity that the philosophy nominally deconstructs by emphasizing that the self-actualization of followers is tied to the actions of a single leader who holds positional authority (Dugan, 2017, p. 205). Such critiques indicate the importance of considering leadership practice within its specific context. Though a philosophy or



model may seem to express a certain theoretical view of the world, how it is practically enacted can either emphasize that perspective or appropriate it for other purposes.

It is also vital to keep in mind that leadership is a complex concept with many different approaches across global contexts. Philosophies that focus on collective leadership rather than single individuals have been present in social activist movements (Dugan, 2017, p. 66), indigenous approaches to leadership (Cajete, 2015, p. 145-146; Gambrell, 2019), and other contexts long before their ideals became accepted in Western academic theory. As a field, leadership studies historically has a Western bias and “ideological ethnocentrism” (GuramatunhuCooper, 2019, p. 3). In addition to critical leadership studies, scholars have endeavored to intervene in this bias by examining how Western theories appear or change in different global contexts (GuramathunhuCooper, 2019). Such research illustrates how cultural-specific concepts like the African idea of “ubuntu” can evolve leadership practices by emphasizing a communal and interdependent form of leadership as “a collective activity that requires mutual inquiry and learning” (Rego et al., 2019, p. 248). Leadership can thus also be reconceptualized according to distinct cultural values and practices.

This thesis predominantly uses the theoretical underpinning that emerged from Western leadership theory because the object of study, *Dragon Age: Inquisition (DAI)*, was constructed within a similar sociopolitical context that produced those theories. Furthermore, these models, as discussed by CLS scholars, require academic intervention so that they can be deconstructed and recontextualized. These leadership models are not presumed to be the innovations of the Western thinkers who organized them, but they do form a useful body of literature for examining the representations of leadership in Western media, art, and culture. Future research into

leadership in videogames should bring in additional perspectives from other contexts to further this critique.

Of course, it is doubtful that BioWare created *Dragon Age: Inquisition* with a particular leadership theory in mind and much more likely that the game's numerous systems, management pathways, and moral choices are constructed from a variety of informal theories. Dugan (2017) defines informal theories as representing "individuals' often subconscious thinking about the way the world or particular phenomena operate," calling them "powerful tools from which to make meaning when they are consciously constructed" (p. 11). These informal understandings can have significant ramifications on how the phenomena is understood. For example, research on "lay" theories of leadership reveals them to be predominantly masculine in nature (Hoyt et al., 2020, p. 391). If such theories are not named and reflected upon, people who create media that deal with the topic of leadership will likely reflect these unconscious biases in their creations.

One of the central goals of this thesis is to make these unconscious theories apparent, to name and critique them. This thesis uses a critical approach to leadership studies to examine how opportunities to enact leadership in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* connect to, reflect, and manifest the various formal theories discussed by leadership studies scholars. It will consider how those leadership forms emerge from neoliberal capitalist logics, intersect with critiques of the world-savior trope in videogames, and suggest how certain prototypical behaviors, for better or worse, become emblematic of leadership in games.

### ***Leadership Studies, Popular Culture, and Ideology/ies***

As a popular social myth, the topic of leadership appears across popular culture artifacts, prompting scholars of management and leadership to analyze the leadership styles embodied by

the fictional characters of this media (*Exploring Effective Leadership Practices Through Popular Culture*, n.d.). As Biehl (2021a) states in *Leadership in Game of Thrones*,

In this book, I use this very issue of power, influence, or leadership as a starting point for an analysis of *Game of Thrones*. I understand popular culture as a performative practice (Kleiner & Wile, 2013) that conveys meaning to people and enables understanding, including of interpersonal interaction and struggles for authority, power, and meaning that affect us all (p. 2).

Biehl's endeavor differs from this thesis in that she attempts to integrate management studies with cultural studies whereas this project weaves together critical leadership studies with game studies research. However, the projects share the premise that popular culture artifacts convey ideas that are significant to audiences.

This perspective is echoed by Ian Towers's research into the changing managerial styles presented in popular TV series. Inspired by Althusser, Towers (2018) claims that a work of art, "such as a TV program, contains traces of the society in which it was produced" (p. 243). These traces contribute to the cultural discourse on the topics depicted in those programs, "they grant legitimacy to management ideas by helping to construct a discourse that privileges those practices and styles that are appropriate for a particular stage in the development of capitalism" (Towers, 2018, p. 251). This socialization leads to a prevailing "common sense" for what leadership in society looks like (Towers, 2018, p. 242). While it may be a stretch to claim that audience members learn how to be a manager or leader from media experiences,<sup>4</sup> these cultural works still reflect and validate certain cultural values and perceptions. The continual repetition of

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<sup>4</sup> Further research from Biehl indicates that popular culture artifacts like film and TV can be used in the form of art education to help people reflect on managerial and leadership lessons in media, but such learning requires the presence of an educator, facilitator, or classroom environment to provide the structure required for such learning (2021b).

images of leaders as heroic, altruistic individuals in film and television may not lead to conscious learning, but they do reinforce hegemonic notions of individualism and meritocracy that may socialize people to associate leadership with these values.

Videogames and media in general therefore contribute to ideological notions of leadership. Like Towers, Justin Kever draws on Althusser's conception of ideology and applies it to videogames. He summarizes a distinction Althusser makes between "ideologies" plural and "Ideology" capitalized in the following passage: "Althusser's theory does not concern ideologies, which are contingent sociohistorical products... Ideology is the material configuration of subjects through ritualized practices whose form is determined by the material construction of the apparatus that is actively constituting the subject" (Kever, 2022, para. 21, 22). Kever goes on to explain that ideologies influence "particular modes of corporeal discipline and habit formation that are specific to individual game texts" whereas Ideology refers to the "form of subject formation" that occurs when players engage with a game and, by doing so, become a player-subject (2022, para. 30). This project is concerned with both Ideology and ideologies. Its first research question endeavors to identify the "ritualized practices" by which *Dragon Age: Inquisition* allows players to assume a leader identity in relation to the game, thereby examining the Ideological element of subject formation. The project will then approach the second research question by examining the ideologies or values and worldviews that are rhetorically communicated to players through the narrative and gameplay structures that contextualize this subjectivized identity.

The central premise for this thesis is that videogames, long overlooked in their depictions of leadership, can also be considered alongside other media forms as supporting ideological perspectives and contributing to the socialization of how people view leaders. Gerald Voorhees

provides one way to think through the impacts of these cultural artifacts by drawing on Kenneth Burke's notion of "equipment for living." Equipment for living, as outlined by Voorhees (2009), suggests that texts can be viewed as "proverbs writ large [functioning] to console, to avenge, to aide in foretelling and, encapsulating the other functions, to 'name typical, recurrent situations'" (para. 16). Voorhees (2009) asserts that games "can be understood to serve the same function by providing representative anecdotes of common social experiences" (para. 16.). The experience of leadership, whether from the perspective of leading or following, can certainly be called a "common social experience." These situations are often modeled by videogames, especially role-playing games like those studied by Voorhees. I argue that videogames model social situations that players must respond to and navigate, requiring an active engagement in the leadership process. This engagement does not necessarily mean that players learn how to lead from playing videogames. Rather, players engage with videogames in the active co-creation of the leadership process, investing themselves and their worldviews in the configuration or rejection of the game's ideological expressions. This investment occurs in the intersection between the player's own understanding of leadership and the opportunities to engage in leadership presented by the game's affordances.

### ***Game Studies and Leadership***

Within the field of game studies, the topic of leadership has been explored from several angles. These include commentaries on the diversity in leadership roles at studios that develop games (Bailey et al., 2021), discussions about how leadership functions within eSports teams (Falkenthal & Byrne, 2021), and how leadership acts as a motivational factor for players to participate in multiplayer games (Graham & Gosling, 2013; Yee, 2002, p. 9). Several studies have also used surveys, focus groups, or close examinations of small groups in multiplayer

contexts to elucidate the leadership traits and processes that appear in those contexts (Falkenthal & Byrne, 2021; Lisk et al., 2012; Martey & Consalvo, 2011).

Another common type of research has been to examine the potential for leadership education and development through the process of games-based learning. Nick Yee (2006) pursued this research within the context of popular MMORPGs, but these studies often consider "serious games," which emphasize education instead of entertainment, as avenues for developing skills that are transferable to real life (Romero et al., 2014). Romero et al., perform a literature review of the effects of serious games on skill development and education, concluding that such projects are capable of teaching "21<sup>st</sup> century skills" (2014). In a similar vein, Sousa and Rocha's analysis of games-based learning initiatives indicate these projects can be successful, but they go on to suggest that this analysis must be extended to reveal what specific elements of games-based learning are most effective (2019).

Research on leadership in games thus tends to view them as a new media form that can motivate students to learn (Raphael et al., 2010), understanding videogames as tools, even if they are designed for entertainment (Geraci & Recine, 2014). As a result, there is very little textual analysis of the leadership philosophies and values presented through a game's narrative and mechanics. Geraci and Recine's 2014 study on *Star Wars: The Old Republic* does identify that the philosophical nature of the game's conflict could extend the players' critical thinking processes to material outside the game, but the insights into leadership specifically are limited.

While this body of research is important, it leaves a gap that should be addressed. The studies emphasize multiplayer games with virtually no attention being paid to single-player narratives that involve themes of leadership. Videogames are tools for learning and spaces for online communities, but they are also media entertainment experiences people play in isolation.

How leadership processes are designed and embedded into videogames has the potential to reveal much about our cultural understanding of leadership.

Such analyses of how games reveal cultural attitudes and convey thematic ideas are numerous, even if none have directly touched on leadership. Brendan Keogh calls his critique of *Spec Ops: The Line* a "close, critical reading" of the game's visuals, sound, writing, gameplay mechanics, and other components. He calls this act of interpretation "necessarily selective," but also notes that it will not be reflective of everyone's experience with the game (2012, p. 9). Such a stance is reminiscent of Miguel Sicart's perspective on ethical videogames when he claims that "not all games and not all players will experience a moral gameplay situation, even if the game is designed with that intention. Play is a complex phenomenon, and game design can only aspire to cue play activities and experiences" (Sicart, 2013, p. 91). My work follows these scholars as an endeavor of interpretation. I may discover findings on the nature of leadership in videogames that are not always experienced the same by other players. Such is the potentially appropriative nature of play. Still, identifying the "cues" (Sicart, 2009) that games embed to subjectivize players into acting as a leader can indicate how they present common sense understandings of what being a leader entails.

### ***Game Studies: Procedural and Narrative Domains***

In expressing and presenting ideas to players, videogames inherently engage in the performance of rhetoric. According to Sebastian Deterding (2019), the term rhetorics "refers to a network of mutually fitting and reinforcing ideas, underlying (folk) theories and epistemological stances, exemplars, application areas, and practices" (p. 131). Within the context of videogames, these rhetorics can emerge from a variety of systems, rules, and representations, all contributing to the ideological worldview embedded within the game.

Drawing on Ian Bogost's procedural rhetoric, this thesis analyzes how videogames embed leadership philosophies into their game mechanics. According to Bogost (2008), "procedures (or processes) are sets of constraints that create possibility spaces, which can be explored through play" (p. 122). In this way, "when video games represent things—anything from space demons to long-term debt—they do so through procedurality, by constructing rule-based models of their chosen topics" (Bogost, 2008, p. 123). Accordingly, when interpreting the leadership values within a game, one must pay attention to the rules and mechanics that define how players can perform acts of leadership within the game's possibility space. Can they influence the worldviews of non-player characters (NPCs) or otherwise improve their lives? Is there any mechanical pushback against the player's decisions about what is best for their team, or does the game simply accept their decision as law? How leadership is operationalized through gameplay and the rules that govern its functioning are central to this project.

Two additional concepts that dovetail with Bogost's procedural rhetoric are directed freedom and dynamic meaning. Directed freedom is an idea that attempts to resolve the tension between the apparent freedom of players and the fact that that freedom is constrained by the rules of the game (Navarro-Remesal, 2018, p. 179). As Navarro-Remesal (2018) states, "the promise of video games as a medium seems to be, at first glance, that we can do as we please within a separate reality, but in actuality we have limited abilities and resources to overcome obstacles" (p. 179). The notion of dynamic meaning, first advanced by game designer Jonathan Blow and later picked up by scholar Christopher Patterson (2015), complements directed freedom; it refers to the "meaning that grows out of exploring a game's rules and boundaries," and, critically, it is a valid sense of meaning that may not necessarily be intended by the developer (p. 210). In other words, players of videogames are directed by the procedural systems, but retain some degree of



freedom in how they go about exploring the dynamic meaning of those systems even if that freedom is limited. In relation to *DAI*, one will be able to observe the game's perspective on leadership by analyzing its rules: the systems that govern how players interact with the world,<sup>5</sup> the choices available to players for influencing the world around them, and the conditions that can lead to a state of failure within the game.

Leadership as embedded in a game's procedural rhetoric is not the only space for elucidating its philosophy. Miguel Sicart expands on the idea of procedural rhetoric by suggesting that games convey meaning through two domains: the procedural and the semiotic. Sicart (2013) states that "a procedural level contains the rules, mechanics, and other systems, and a semiotic level communicates, contextualizes, and makes users empathize with this system," (p. 87). The semiotic domain refers to numerous elements of imagery, sound, and other symbols that can contextualize the act of playing a game. However, since procedural systems often include such components, this thesis will use Sicart's formulation of two complementary domains but instead distinguish between the procedural domain and the "narrative domain." This narrative domain functions similarly to Sicart's semiotic domain, but it focuses on elements such as the game's overarching plot, cutscenes that convey narrative information, and conversations with various characters that contribute to the story's context. For example, in *DAI* the player can recruit numerous companions to the Inquisition. This recruitment process is an element of the procedural domain, but the player can then speak with these characters to learn about their opinions on the world, the other companions, and, importantly, you, the protagonist. These conversations occur within the game's narrative domain. Characters in *DAI* can have vastly different perspectives on what kind of leadership the Inquisition requires to be successful,

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<sup>5</sup> *DAI*'s system of quantifying and measuring "Power" is one such system and is explored in Chapter 5.

whether it be a decisive authority as advocated by Iron Bull or the more democratic figure suggested by Sera. Furthermore, some of these characters occupy positions of leadership themselves, such as The Iron Bull and Leliana. The various perspectives on leadership that players encounter within this narrative domain will inform their understanding of what it means to be a leader within the context of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*'s procedural rules and systems.

### ***Game Studies: Ethical dimensions***

The rhetorics of videogames inherently contain an ethical dimension and this is also true of leadership. In identifying that leadership is a socially constructed process, Dugan (2017) asserts that “how [leadership] is constructed represents the value norms that a particular group of people endorse at a given point in time” (p. 8). He notes that these values can be abhorrent, as exemplified by Adolf Hitler or Pol Pot, but they are still values, nonetheless. There is no such thing as “value free” or “neutral” leadership. Such an ethical dimension is also always present in videogame design. As Miguel Sicart claims,

A computer game is a designed system of rules that creates a game world. These rules and that game world can have embedded ethical values: the behaviors they create, and how those are communicated to players, constitute the ethics of computer game design. The creators of games are then ethically responsible for the design of the rules and world, while players are responsible for their experience of the game – the ways they interpret and enact the embedded ethical values of a computer game (Sicart, 2009, p. 58-59).

Important to this description is Sicart's note that the videogame player is an active participant in the creation of the game's ethical meaning. This is a perspective adopted by many game studies and media studies theorists who have shifted away from viewing audience members as passive viewers (Hall, 1981; Jennings, 2019; Towers, 2018). In discussing how videogames engage in a

process where they subjectivize players into becoming “player-subjects” of the game, Sicart states that “the player as subject is only a subset of a cultural and moral being who voluntarily plays, bringing to the game a presence of culture and values that also affect the experience” (Sicart, 2009, p. 63). Much like leadership, playing videogames is never a value-neutral process because it inherently engages the player’s cultural and ethical values.

Play for Sicart is an appropriative practice and open to many different creative expressions by the player: “To play is to inhabit a wiggle space of possibility in which we can express ourselves – our values, beliefs, and politics” (2013, p. 9). Nevertheless, Sicart (2009) also addresses the fact that, like Navarro-Remesal’s acknowledgement of directed freedom, players always have a limited range of options or affordances with which to perform this appropriation (2009, p. 56). These narrowed options force players to engage any given game in an ethical dialogue; meaning is generated from a confluence of the game’s embedded systems and designed affordances as well as the player’s creative engagement in those systems. Both game system and player action are critical elements to generating meaning.

This demonstrates one of the fundamental tensions in game studies: that of studying the meaning that derives from the player’s own choices as well as the messages embedded in the game’s procedural and narrative domains. In the article *I Fought the Law: Transgressive Play and the Implied Player*, Espen Aarseth (2007) discusses this tension by juxtaposing two constructs against one another: the implied player<sup>6</sup> and transgressive play. The implied player is a subject who proceeds through a given game’s expectations by submitting to the rules of the game, whereas transgressive play emerges when players “do unexpected things, often just because these actions are not explicitly forbidden” (p. 132). Transgressive play is a “symbolic

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<sup>6</sup> The use of the “implied player” was influenced by Wolfgang Iser’s concept of the “implied reader” from literary studies (Aarseth, 2007, p. 132).

gesture of rebellion against the tyranny of the game, a (perhaps illusory) way for the played subject to regain their sense of identity and uniqueness through the mechanisms of the game itself” (Aarseth, 2007, p. 132). This project understands that meaning within games can emerge from exploring the opportunities for play afforded to the implied player while also considering the possibility for players to transgress those affordances. Players therefore have the potential to engage their ethical perspectives and play against or counter to a game’s embedded ideologies.

### ***The Player-Leader Subject***

One important component of Sicart’s ethical formulations is his assertion that videogames subjectivize individuals as players. Drawing on Foucault’s conception of power as emergent in the relationships between subjects, Sicart states that “games create subjectivities because they operate as power structures. Their ontology as objects starts a subjectivization process on their users that makes them become players of that game” (Sicart, 2009, p. 68). This player-subject has adapted to the possibility space of the game world, inhabiting the virtual space according to the designed affordances of that game.

This argument that “games create players” through a process of subjectivization can be extrapolated for specific subjectivities. Daniel Vella identifies the concept of a “ludic subject-position” to describe how players are situated “in a particular position in relation to a game...to inhabit the ludic subject-position is to adopt a particular mode of being towards the gameworld” (p. 441). This “way of being” is both generated and constrained by the affordances of a game’s design structures, incentivizing certain behaviors and attitudes. In relation to *Untitled Goose Game*, Vella asserts that “the game encourages the player to *be* playfully mischievous, even beyond what the objectives specifically demand;” the game subjectivizes players into assuming the identity of a mischievous goose (p. 442). We can extend these ideas for our specific purpose:

By positioning its player-character in an explicit position of leadership and designing affordances that encourage players to perform in-game behaviors that represent leadership, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* subjectivizes the player into assuming the identity of a leader in relation to the game world. Through this process, the player assumes a “player-leader” subjectivity. The player-leader subject emerges when a player accepts the constraints of the game’s directed freedom, enabling them to engage with the process of leadership through designed systems while generating dynamic meaning through their creative appropriation of those affordances.

This player-leader does not appear as a value-neutral subject. Rather, their values and ethical potentialities, as indicated by Sicart (2009), are already partly defined by both the player’s own cultural values as well as those embedded in the game’s procedural and semiotic domains. However, many scholars have demonstrated that the values associated with videogame protagonists are problematic. Jennings (2022) identifies that

Over the course of gameworld events, many heroic player-protagonists find themselves thrust into decisive roles not just as the warriors who must defeat the aggressive Other, but also as the decision-makers who alone are suited to select and dictate the appropriate responses to the threat (p. 330).

These “world-savior” characters are positioned as powerful individuals that go through a meritocratic process of transforming into a “force of unparalleled power,” and Jennings (2022) asserts that this reifies hegemonic masculinity and systems of neoliberal capitalism.

Such critiques also exist in leadership studies. Numerous articles have been written on the problematic conception of the leader as an individual hero (Maier, 2014; McGee-Cooper & Trammell, 1994) with John Dugan theorizing that this may “stem in part from the highly individualistic cultural orientation of the United States (and many other countries for that

matter), which emphasizes competition and achievement” (2017, p. 17). Various leadership theories, such as trait theory, emerged from the notion that effective leaders were born with innate attributes that predestined them to be successful (Northouse, 2022, p. 80). Though these ideas have been mostly abandoned by scholars, many such perspectives continue to hold sway in popular conceptions of leadership, perpetuated in part by the protagonists of film, videogames, and other popular media who often emerge as seemingly preordained heroes. Thus, we can observe a parallel concern for and critique of the individualistic and masculine “world-savior” and “hero-leader” tropes emerging from both game studies and critical leadership studies.

### ***Genre, RPGs, and Quantification***

*Dragon Age: Inquisition* is described by the game’s official website and journalists using the “Action Role-Playing Game” genre label (*Dragon Age: Inquisition*, n.d.; Ingenito, 2014). The “action” identifier is certainly a suitable descriptor for *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, but this thesis is chiefly concerned with the genre that is more closely associated with the game: the “role-playing game” or “RPG.” Role-playing games have a long history that predates videogame development. Their roots extend to the table-top RPG *Dungeons & Dragons*, with many of their numeric systems being adaptations or evolutions of that game’s mechanics (Apperley, 2006, p. 17).

Role-play involves a particular form of play. Abstracted from videogames, role-play involves “the kind of play in which we behave ‘as if’: as if we were someone else, somewhere else, in imaginary bodies, worlds or identities” (Burn, 2014, p. 241). In the context of *Dungeons and Dragons* and other table-top RPGs, this “as if” play entails forming a “collectively produced fantasy” within a social space of fellow role-players (Apperley, 2006, p. 17). Role-playing games are essentially about assuming new identities. A person’s personality may still be reflected in the

choices they make within that identity (Consalvo et al., 2019), but RPGs allow players to explore positionalities, situations, and choices that they might not otherwise experience. This includes the potential to engage in the role-play of being the leader of a fantasy organization.

Over time, however, the process of remediation from table-top game to videogame produced some changes in the genre. Given that many early role-playing videogames were single-player adventures,<sup>7</sup> these games became less about the social “collective fantasy” and instead centered more around the singular player-character’s personal narrative as the story’s protagonist. As Mark Wolf describes, RPGs became “games in which players create or take on a character represented by various statistics, which may even include a developed persona” with their abilities “usually represented numerically” (2002, p. 130). Furthermore, to supplement the loss of the collective imagination, many videogame RPGs place the player-character in the position of leading a team, often known as a “party,” composed of non-player characters created by the developers to provide additional context for the narrative and support during combat (Burn, 2014, p. 242). There are role-playing games that defy both of these conventions, but they are largely consistent across the genre and they are important components of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. Critically, although the videogame RPG has moved towards a greater reliance on statistical systems and pre-generated worlds and characters, the performance of role-play, of behaving “as if” one is inhabiting a new identity, remains key to the genre.

Media genres do not emerge from a vacuum, and their conventions often reflect the values of the culture that produces them. This is especially true for commercial videogames like *Dragon Age: Inquisition* and many other RPGs. In his article *Risky Business: Neo-liberal Rationality and the Computer RPG*, Andrew Baerg (2012) outlines how the ideology of

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<sup>7</sup> The advent of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGS) would return some degree of the social aspect to RPGs. This sub-genre of games have a significant presence in the game studies literature, but they are not a concern of the current project and so will be referenced rarely, if at all.

neoliberalism becomes reflected in the central dynamics of role-playing games. According to Baerg (2012), the core aspect of neoliberalism, a philosophy predicated on generalizing the principles of the free market to “the entire social body,” is risk management (p. 156-158). This results in a “risk society” where “institutional responsibility and concern for individual fears fades such that individuals are left to deal with insecurity on their own,” creating a “scientifically inflected rationality oriented around calculation” that requires quantification to make risk “legible and discernible” (Baerg, 2012, p. 157-158). Baerg (2012) claims that videogame RPGs support this neoliberal rationality of quantification through the many numerical statistics that govern the game’s functioning and demand the player’s attention. Carolyn Jong (2013) extends Baerg’s analysis, noting that RPGs involve a form of progression where players amass an immense pile of powerful items while improving their player-character’s innate statistics, processes that encourage uncritically stripping the environment and society of resources in the service of accumulating wealth and personal power for the player (p. 80). Within the context of RPGs’ often simplistic “good vs. evil” narratives, this process of individual accumulation is presented as being for the “collective good,” resulting in no negative consequences for the virtual world and reifying the convention of the powerful world-savior figure (Jong, 2013, p. 82). This reliance on quantification and risk management become the sole responsibility of the individual player-character, leading role-playing games as a genre to express many neoliberal values.

That being said, genre is not deterministic. It is merely a way to pare down the massive category of “videogame” broadly into understandable and observable chunks. Arsenault argues that the concept of genre is actually an illusion and that “the bundling of disparate concepts under a single name gives them a false impression of unity” (2009, p. 157). Role-playing games may share conventions, but that does not mean that they all express the same worldviews or



values. The conventions of the RPG genre may lean toward values of quantification and risk-management, but there is space within those conventions as well as in the transgressive potential of play (Ruberg, 2019) for players to experience and generate new forms of dynamic meaning.

### ***BioWare, Mass Effect, and Dragon Age***

No research has yet been undertaken to study *Dragon Age: Inquisition* in relation to the topic of leadership, yet several scholars have written about BioWare's games and the commonalities between them. Kristine Jørgensen notes that BioWare's reputation for writing compelling non-player characters leads to novel story structures where the player-character may not actually be the narrative's protagonist as well as situations where the player-character's personality is defined mostly by their relationships to the NPCs (2010). An important component of these relationships, as identified by Jørgensen, is that players have the opportunity to initiate "personal growth and development" for these characters: "*Development* happens through the unveiling of latent potentials in the character, and character *growth* happens through changing or maturing together with the progression of the plot" (2010, p. 318). On the surface, these elements position the player as a potentially benevolent force for change, a leader who engages openly in mutually supportive relationships.

Analyses of many videogames designed for entertainment, however, often find latent structures that reinforce dominant ideologies. In contrast to Jørgensen's claim that BioWare's games provide opportunities for compelling narratives, Christopher Patterson (2015) suggests that the development and growth identified by Jørgensen leads players to manipulate those teammates so that they become strategic tools to be deployed on the battlefield (p. 208, 215). Further, even though the presence of companions is nominally an effort to emphasize a value of collectivism, Baerg asserts that the required "active management" of party selection, equipment,

and combat tactics, “responsibilize the player” so that every element of the game is filtered through a neoliberal political rationality of quantification (2012, p. 169). These considerations are critical for an analysis of leadership in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* because they demonstrate the cultural values and ideologies in which its representation of leadership are enmeshed.

The values engaged by these systems and responsibilities have corollaries in the leadership studies literature. Dugan (2017) categorizes three leadership theories as “Theories of Production and Effectiveness”: behavioral (style), situational, and path-goal leadership. While these theories seemingly produced a greater concern for follower roles in comparison to overwhelmingly leader-centric models like trait theory, Dugan argues that leadership theories of production and effectiveness engage in a “commodification of people” where the “concern for workers was *in service of* productivity, *not* because it was the right thing to do” resulting in the leader maintaining a position as singularly responsible agent (2017, p. 141). Leadership theories and videogame design thus both invoke precariously neoliberal logics. When their emphases become fixated on outcomes rather than processes or people, they can both reify philosophies that commodify certain actors for the purpose of achieving those outcomes.

### ***The Question of “Leadership” in Videogames***

As has been noted, many theories have moved away from understanding leadership as being specifically tied to positional roles and actions of control. This movement toward more egalitarian structures has ramifications on the practicality of identifying leadership processes. Alvesson and Spicer note that “As the concept [of leadership] has been applied to increasingly varied processes it has become ever more blunted” (2012, p. 370). This raises a necessary question: how do we identify a player’s action as an act of leadership within the game world? If many contemporary leadership theories decentralize leadership away from simply being

associated with a position of authority, how do we avoid blunting the concept even further by calling every action the player takes an act of leadership? Upon initiating this project, I offered the following potential description for leadership in games:

An act of leadership in a videogame involves the player making an in-game choice that has an observable and lasting impact on the virtual world.

This definition acted as a hypothesis with boundaries that were tested as part of the data collection process.

After completing the data collection phase of the project, this description stood out as reinforcing several problematic elements. For one, it overemphasizes outcomes, suggesting that leadership is only leadership if something is achieved, reinforcing an ethos of production and effectiveness above people and process. Furthermore, it led to numerous situations in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* that would fall under the definition but would not be likely to subjectivize players into becoming player-leaders. Considering these factors, I present this early hypothetical definition not as an endorsed description, but as an example to depict the complexities of the question at hand and why it is worth probing.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

This literature review has covered considerable conceptual ground, from deconstructing the terminology commonly associated with leadership to addressing the genre form of role-playing games. There are several important considerations to highlight as we move on from this overview. First, leadership is a process engaged by people. It is not something that an individual holds and it does not directly correspond to hierarchical positions. Instead, it appears within mutual interactions between entities who perform leadership and followership behaviors,

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<sup>8</sup> A more in-depth discussion of this definition and its revision appears in Chapter 3: “Defining ‘Leadership’ in Videogames.”

resulting in a reciprocal leader/follower identity cocreation process. These mutual interactions invariably contain a set of values that can be examined through identifying how the leadership process configures the relationships, power dynamics, and outcomes involved in a given context.

Second, depictions of leadership in media tend to replicate elements of the dominant ideological worldview that produces those media artifacts. In other words, media forms represent the “common sense” of what leadership should be or look like at any given time. At the moment in Western society, this is characterized by the exercising of power by an individual world-savior or hero-leader character, archetypes that manifest individualistic and meritocratic values associated with neoliberalism.

Third, both game studies and leadership studies are engaging in critically reflexive turns to reexamine these archetypal structures and conceptualize them in more democratic forms. This reveals a significant overlap between the two fields that allows them to be integrated in a unified direction. The theoretical frameworks emerging from leadership studies provide a vocabulary with which to analyze the designed structures of videogames while the videogame form offers a space that can represent leadership in novel ways. This compatibility extends beyond the current project. For now, however, it suffices to acknowledge that the objects of study for both fields, videogames as cultural artifacts and leadership as a practice, contain conventions that are precariously neoliberal in their implicit value judgments, indicating an underlying worldview that must be critiqued.

Fourth, videogames subjectivize their players into developing a particular “way of being” in relation to the game world. This way of being can extend to a vast number of subjectivities. When a game encourages players to perform actions that are conventionally understood as leadership behaviors, the player is likely to understand themselves as a leader in relation to the

game world. Through this process, the game subjectivizes players into assuming the “player-leader” subjectivity.<sup>9</sup>

Videogames often depict player-characters in positions of leadership. Despite this, game studies scholars have not addressed how this common positionality reinforces certain values and contributes to the “common sense” of what leadership is, a common sense that has been identified as vague and problematic. This chapter integrated leadership studies and game studies, establishing a vocabulary that can identify and critique the power structures that have so far gone unnamed in videogame representations of leadership. This integration will be completed in Chapter 3: “Defining Leadership in Videogames” and the opportunities for analysis will be demonstrated by Chapters 4-7. The next chapter will discuss the methodology by which the study was conducted and the specific leadership theories that provide the vocabulary for the analysis.

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<sup>9</sup> This subjectivity will be explored at greater length in Chapter 3: Defining Leadership in Videogames.

## Chapter 2 - Methodology

### *Game Analysis Toolkit*

When game studies first emerged as an academic discipline, there was little agreement about the appropriate methodologies to perform research. In 2003, Espen Aarseth claimed that there were three central methods for researchers to analyze a game: studying the rules and mechanics, observing others play, and playing the game themselves (p. 2). He asserted that the last of these was the best method, "especially if combined or reinforced by the other two. If we have not experienced the game personally, we are liable to commit severe misunderstandings" (2003, p. 3). While Aarseth encouraged the act of playing a game and closely studying its rules, he did not lay out a clear system of analysis. Scholars Mia Consalvo and Nathan Dutton addressed this lack of specificity through the creation of the Game Analysis Toolkit methodology (2006). This toolkit identifies four areas of videogames for researchers to analyze: the object inventory, interface study, interaction map, and gameplay log (2006). Through this toolkit, Consalvo and Dutton sought to make clear how the critical techniques of textual and ideological analysis could be applied to games.

Consalvo and Dutton consider the object inventory and interface study the more "static" of these four elements. The object inventory entails creating a catalogue of objects in the game world and identifying their various applications while the interface study involves analyzing "any on-screen information that provides the player with information concerning the life, health, location or status of the character(s)" (Consalvo & Dutton, 2006). My approach to these components is framed by questions that explore the dynamic meaning of *DAI*. What objects can the player use to engage in the social process of leadership? How does the game's interface make

players aware of their followers and configure options for leading them? What leadership behaviors are unavailable to the player due to their absence from these options?

The interaction map encompasses all the choices players have for interacting with NPCs or other players if the game is multiplayer. Recognizing that this is a complex area, Consalvo & Dutton identify that “the expansive, changeable nature of gameplay in many titles, [may] make it impossible (or just implausible) to consider recording or finding (and analyzing) every possible interaction with which the player is presented” (2006). Given that I treat leadership as a relational process, the interaction map for *DAI* is central to my analysis. I focus on examining the directed freedom with which players can interact with and lead NPCs as well as their opportunities to make decisions that influence the game world. Such leadership interactions are exemplified by dialogue exchanges in which the Inquisitor must mediate conflicts between companions, the choices players make about which combat skills to improve for those companions, and the many Decision Points where the Inquisitor makes consequential choices such as allying with one side in the conflict between Mages and Templars.

Finally, the gameplay log is the most ambiguous of the various elements. Essentially, this log puts together “the ‘larger picture’ of the game that might have been fragmented through analysis of discrete segments such as the interface, objects or interactions alone” (Consalvo & Dutton, 2006). This enables the observation of “emergent,” or unexpected moments, discovering game design, aesthetics, or interactions that may not have been intentionally authored by the developers, but are nonetheless part of the game’s “text” and thus communicate messages that can be analyzed. The gameplay log is vital to exploring the dynamic meaning of leadership in *DAI*.

### ***Interpretation and Close Reading***

The game analysis toolkit thus provides a framework for approaching videogames using the tenets of textual analysis. Textual analysis itself is a broad category of methodologies, one which considers most cultural artifacts that convey meaning to audiences as “texts.” Alan McKee states that, “We Interpret texts (films, television programmes, magazines, advertisements, clothes, graffiti, and so on) in order to try and obtain a sense of the ways in which, in particular cultures at particular times, people make sense of the world around them” (2003, p. 1). Clara Fernandez-Vara asserts that this process of interpretation can be applied to videogames as well, stating that games can be considered texts using the general framework of the term advanced by McKee and Barthes (2019, p. 5-6). This project uses the game analysis toolkit as a methodology for performing textual analysis and engaging in the process of interpretation.

The interpretation of any given text involves the study of hermeneutics, or the study of interpretation itself. As described by Theresa Tanenbaum, “hermeneutic inquiry is grounded in the expert interpretation of texts from a given point of view” (Tanenbaum, 2015, p. 60). Subjectivity and context are critical considerations. Interpretations are generated when, “A reader enters into a relationship with a text, traversing it for as long as is necessary to reach an equilibrium between his or her own situated subjectivity and the demands of the text.” (Tanenbaum, 2015, p. 61). Hermeneutics is therefore self-reflexive, requiring researchers to unpack their positionality to understand how their interpretations emerge relative to the artifact being studied and the culture in which they find themselves.

Hermeneutic inquiry is central to pursuing textual analysis of videogames. The processes of self-reflexivity and inquiry have been implemented by many game studies scholars (Consalvo & Dutton, 2006; Keogh, 2012) and emerged “from a non-uniform, multidisciplinary movement, which is informed by the insight that there is a certain medium-specific poetics of digital games



and that this poetics can not only be played, but also read, deconstructed and critically analysed” (Klosinski, 2022). Such processes serve as a reminder of Fernandez-Vara’s claim that “Rather than limiting ourselves to thinking about games as a medium to convey messages, we can think of them as artifacts that encode certain values and ideas, which players decode and engage with as they play” (2019, p. 8). This project engages in these processes of interpretation, understanding the meaning of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*’s “text” as emergent in the intersection of my own subjectivity and the embedded meaning conveyed through the game’s narrative and procedural rhetoric.

To facilitate this inquiry, I performed a “close reading” of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. Bizzochi and Tanenbaum pull close reading from its traditional roots in literary theory to identify it as a practice of “detailed examination, deconstruction, and analysis of a media text,” one which can be applied to games as well (2011, p. 289). This practice is “a way of laying bare the faults and inconsistencies of a media artifact...Through the act of close interrogation and explication, a theorist may use close reading to excavate previously hidden qualities of a media artifact” (Bizzochi & Tanenbaum, 2011, p. 289). As advocated by hermeneutics, however, close readings should not create an “artificial critical vacuum” (Tanenbaum, 2015) that considers only the text itself. Rather, they should integrate the researcher’s own subjectivity with “the unique perspective of the reading [to provide] a meaningful interpretative frame for a textual critique” (Tanenbaum, 2015, p. 65). Using these principles of self-reflexivity, the game analysis toolkit guided my close reading of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*.

### ***Data Collection***

Close reading as a process can occur through varied approaches to data collection. The practices I implemented connected to many of those suggested by Tanenbaum’s article

*Hermeneutic Inquiry for Digital Games Research* (2015). I took handwritten notes as I played *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, identifying procedural systems and narrative components that connected to the topic of leadership as well as noting my in-the-moment interpretations of them. Furthermore, I took many screenshots during each play session and collected them into an image journal that could convey a visual snapshot of my experience with the game. These two methods, along with a “granular” save process that allowed me to access distinct chapters of the game with relative ease, are Tanenbaum’s suggested techniques for performing a close reading of videogames.



Figure 2.1 - A screenshot from the Hinterlands, the first open-world environment in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare, 2014).

I also implemented a process of personal reflection following each play session. This research log served as a way for me to deconstruct my impressions of the game in a more relaxed and reflective manner. It provided me the opportunity to build on and reconsider my interpretations as themes and details recurred throughout the data collection process. These reflections act as a record for the gameplay log element of the game analysis toolkit methodology, allowing easy reference to the emergent and dynamic meanings I encountered while playing *Dragon Age: Inquisition*.

For the purposes of this research, I completed one playthrough of *DAI*'s main narrative while also engaging in numerous side quests and speaking frequently with NPC companions. I also began a second playthrough where I explored fewer dialogue scenes and focused almost entirely on the game's primary narrative, concluding after completing the quest "Wicked Eyes, Wicked Hearts." This second playthrough ended here as the quest occurs approximately two-thirds into the game's main story, providing me sufficient time to compare how each playthrough differed while not requiring two complete playthroughs of a lengthy and expansive game. I made different decisions in terms of both dialogue responses and major story choices between each playthrough to explore how the game systems and in-game characters would react to distinct leadership choices. While playing the game, I paid close attention to the four components of the game analysis toolkit. Following the completion of each playthrough, I used the collected data to prepare the object inventory, interface study, and interaction map to facilitate in-depth analysis of each element. In total, these two playthroughs involved approximately 120 hours of playtime.

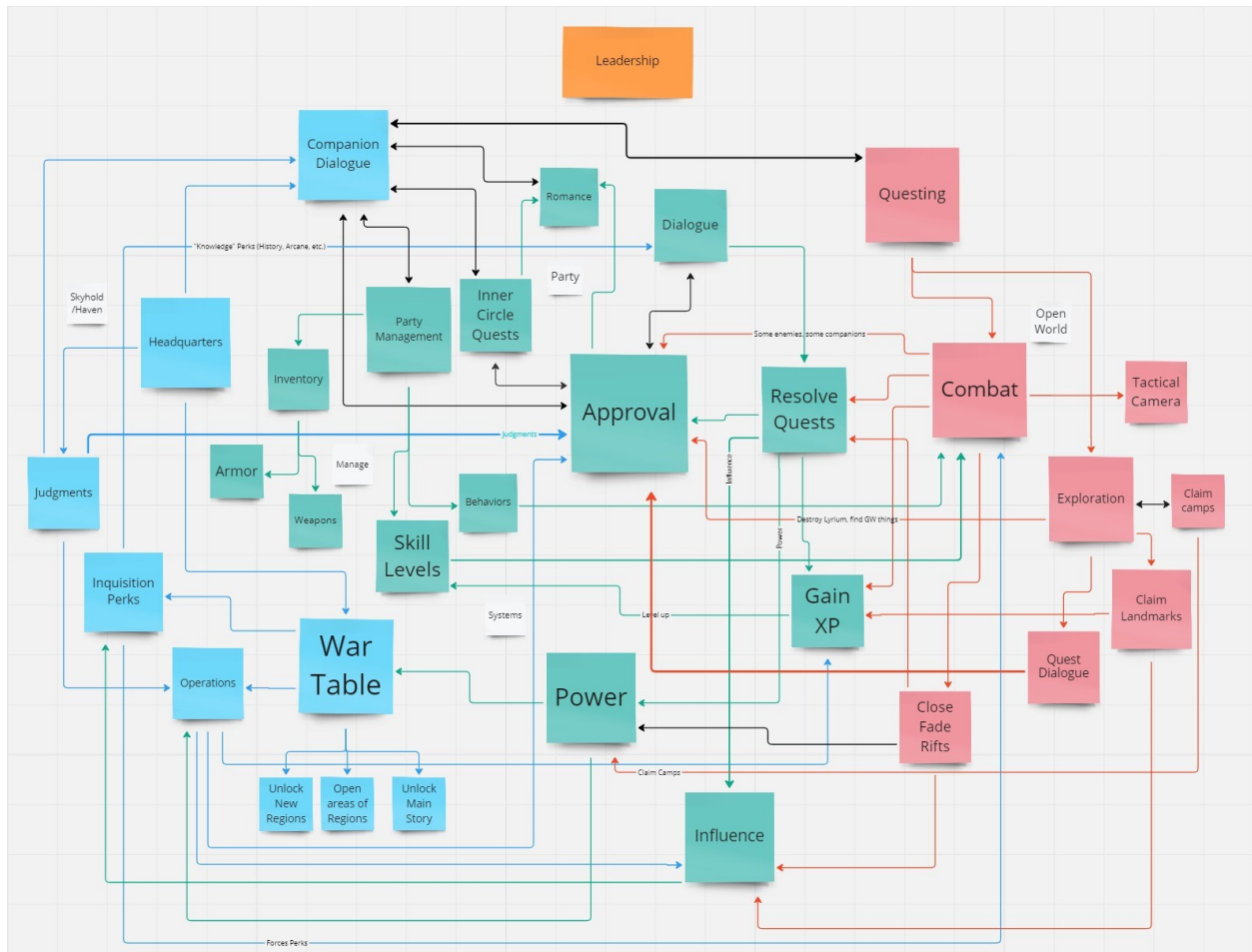


Figure 2.2 - An image of the Interaction Map that represents a selection of gameplay interactions connected to leadership processes in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. Reveals the centrality of the Approval system and the limited outputs of the Power and Influence mechanics. Created using Miro Board.

Through these two playthroughs, I endeavor to engage *Dragon Age: Inquisition* through divergent performative identities. Bizzochi and Tanenbaum identify three difficulties in performing close readings of videogames, with one of the most significant being indeterminacy (Bizzochi & Tanenbaum, 2011). This difficulty arises from the fact that “the material instantiation of a game can change in response to the input of the player” (Tanenbaum, 2015, p. 69). When coupled with the size of many videogames,<sup>10</sup> this variability complicates achieving “equilibrium” with a ludic text and, consequently, can make it difficult to construct

<sup>10</sup> According to “How Long To Beat,” *Dragon Age: Inquisition* requires, at minimum, 46.5 hours of playtime to complete the main narrative (How long is Dragon Age: Inquisition?, n.d.) My first playthrough involved 80 hours of playtime. The second playthrough involved 40.

interpretations. To help foreclose this vast potential for interpretation, Tanenbaum advocates the use of performative identities which are constructed by the player-researcher and are “rooted in a specific playstyle or bias towards the text to explore how the system reveals itself to a particular perspective” (2015, p. 73). Establishing this “artificial subjectivity” (Tanenbaum, 2015, p. 74) through my two divergent playthroughs enables a comparative analysis of two distinct leadership philosophies and allows me to examine how the game systems and fictional world react to those subjectivities.

These two playthroughs featured player-characters that corresponded to distinct positionalities. For the first playthrough, I assumed the identity of a female Qunari mage<sup>11</sup> named Deyna. Through this character, I attempted to engage the game from a subject position that was differentiated from the “default” identity prototype identified by critical leadership studies and game studies scholars (Chin & Trimble, 2015; Navarro-Remesal, 2018; Shaw, 2015, p. 156; Williams et al., 2009). As a leader, Deyna sought to construct mutually supportive relationships with her followers, to avoid hierarchical dominance, and to generate social-justice-based change in the world of Thedas. In the second playthrough, the Inquisitor was constructed as a male human warrior named Conrad to represent conventional leader prototypes. Rather than being inspired by postheroic leadership and critical leadership theory, Conrad pursued goals that centered on accumulating his own power and pursuing solutions to situations that would result in the greatest gain for him personally.

Analysis sought to note whether these different positionalities and dispositions lead to divergent reactions from the game world or whether they would influence my experience of leadership in gameplay as a player-researcher. These two performative identities thus present

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<sup>11</sup> The Qunari fantasy race understands gender differently than the conventions of our contemporary world. However, players must still decide whether their character is masculine or feminine presenting when creating their avatar.

useful comparisons for examining how players can use transgressive play to appropriate a game's embedded messages as well as exploring what dynamics and procedural rhetorics are consistent across playthroughs despite the dispositions and positionality of the player-character.<sup>12</sup>

***Subjectivity and Positionality: Who is the “I” currently speaking to you?***

The act of interpreting videogames is an inherently subjective process. One player can observe the “text” of a game, take notes, and communicate their interpretations, but there is always the possibility for other players to perceive the game in a different light. As Flanagan and Nissenbaum state, “the features of a game as bearers of values emerge in the act of play, dynamically, depending on the context of play and who is playing” (Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2015, p. 10). As your guide through the leadership processes of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, it is necessary to explain elements of my identity, values, and personal history in relation to the concept of leadership.

I am a middle-class, cis-gender white male who was born and raised in Orange County, California in the United States of America. I spent the first 26 years of my life in this suburban town before moving to Montréal, Québec in Canada to pursue graduate studies. I was raised by an upper middle-class family with an older brother and two academically inclined parents who hold progressive political views. Both of my parents, Mark Maier (Ph.D.) and Lori Zucchini (M.S.), are actively engaged in the production of new understandings of leadership. They work together as Leadership Development Associates (LDA), providing leadership consulting services and facilitating team development programs with organizations such as the U.S. Internal Revenue Service and the Space Command. Furthermore, my father was the Founding Chair of the Leadership Studies program at Chapman University, directing the program from 1994 until

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<sup>12</sup> Due to the size and detail of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, there are many more performative identities that could be assumed as lenses to examine leadership processes within the game. Given the scope of this project, however, I was limited to the two presented in this paper.

2022. I earned a minor in this program while attending that university for my undergraduate degree.

Leadership has thus been a key part of my education and socialization. I have been aware of the concept since my earliest memories, and this has made me keenly aware of leadership practice and the power dynamics associated with it my entire life. From my interpersonal interactions to the structure of academia to the stories told by popular culture, I see leadership's recurring themes, images, and logics constantly in the world around me and I hold an inherent aversion to overly bureaucratized structures, autocratic practices, and hierarchy.

This experience does not mean that I am a neutral observer of leadership. In fact, my longstanding awareness of the concept means that I bring more of a personal bias to this topic. Resonating with the theories of postheroic leadership, my parents understand leadership not as positional power, but as a stance directed toward social interaction and interpersonal development (M. Maier & L. Zucchini, personal communication, December 3, 2022). Drawing from the philosophy of servant-leadership, their curricula focus on how leaders who happen to hold power can use their influence to empower and foster the leadership potential in those they lead while centering the importance of ethical, social justice-based values. Leadership in this view is the pursuit of a more democratic, equitable, and ethically just society through the cultivation of the human potential to build that society.

This is the leadership approach in which I have been immersed my entire life and which has most influenced my personal theory and practice. Though this thesis explores the varied definitions of leadership that emerge from different styles and philosophies, my personal history with the perspective of servant-leadership as well as my subjective bias for the progressive

politics of critical leadership studies are two elements that are inextricable from the context of play in which I will be conducting my analysis.

My individual identity plays into these values. As a white man, I have had the privilege to embody practices such as servant-leadership without worrying about having my credibility or ability questioned. This is not the case for all identities. Women and people of color who occupy or aspire to leadership roles must constantly negotiate their identities within organizational structures as their physical appearance, demeanor, competency, and legitimacy are more heavily scrutinized than those of their white male counterparts (Chin & Trimble, 2015; Fletcher, 2004, p. 651; Liu & Baker, 2016, p. 424; Rosette & Livingston, 2012; Sinclair, 1995). This reality becomes especially salient when applied to the performative identities engaged for this project, in particular the first identity of Deyna, the Qunari mage.

The Qunari are a fantasy race in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* who possess gray skin of varying shades and a generally immense physique. As a rigidly defined and theocratic society, Qunari culture differs significantly from the more Western neoliberal states of Thedas in which the game takes place. Thus, the Qunari, like elves in most fantasy worlds (Poor, 2012), act as a racialized “other” within the fiction of *DAI*. Furthermore, mages in this fantasy world are a marginalized and oppressed group with one of the central narrative threads of *DAI* centering the mage rebellion to win new freedoms. Deyna’s positionality was tailored to examine how *DAI* would react to a leader who occupies this “othered” identity. This was then compared to how the game treated Conrad, the second performative identity which hewed much closer to conventional leader prototypes.

Through my research, I found that the game did acknowledge Deyna’s intersectional identity, othering her in some ways while Conrad’s identity was more normalized. Unlike Deyna,



however, I am not part of an ethnic minority within the context of my culture. Given my lived experience, I do not feel capable of speaking to the complexities of negotiating organizational and leadership structures as a woman and person of color in the material world, or the virtual world of Thedas. Sites for future research into how the othering process of in-game fiction can influence depictions of leadership will thus be identified and alluded to but will not be discussed in-depth. The study of leadership representations in videogames is underdeveloped, and it is my hope that diverse voices will approach this topic with the perspectives needed to deconstruct and critique virtual representations of diversity in leadership roles.

This project is thus a self-reflexive commentary. It aims to provide a theoretical foundation from which to critique the ideological hegemony of Western neoliberalism that structures the discourse, practice, and representation of leadership in videogames. It approaches this critique from the perspective of someone who grew up in a position of relative privilege and who has consistently questioned what it means for leaders to hold power and exert influence.

### ***Leadership Lenses***

Drawing on critical leadership studies, this project examines *DAI* through a variety of leadership perspectives. It is important to distinguish between leadership theories and paradigms. This thesis has discussed the concepts of critical leadership studies and postheroic leadership many times, but these should be understood as umbrella terms or paradigms that shape the values with which we approach leadership. Critical leadership studies identifies a scholarly position that is critical of the power dynamics that often emerge in leadership processes while postheroic leadership invokes a set of values that counter the leader-centricity common to mainstream views of leadership. The theories discussed in the following pages represent concrete models of leadership developed to describe behaviors that leaders should enact to lead effectively. These

formal theories provide useful vocabularies and frameworks through which to interpret and explain how the social process of leadership emerges in videogames.

Too many models, theories, and philosophies exist to explicate and apply all of them in this project's case study. As such, this thesis selected a set of theories and models that are readily applicable to the various dynamics present in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. This selection includes Trait-Based Leadership, Leader-Member Exchange Theory, and Servant-Leadership. These theories provide a range of lenses to examine how characters in *DAI* discuss the topic of leadership, what values and theories the game's mechanics encourage players to invest in, and the capacity for players to express their own potentially alternative leadership style.

### ***Trait Theory***

Trait-based leadership is one of the oldest pursuits of leadership studies and focuses on identifying the traits that “distinguish good leaders from bad leaders” (Zaccaro, 2014, p. 14). Zaccaro, Kemp, and Bader state that leader traits are defined by “a range of stable individual differences, including personality, temperament, motives, cognitive abilities, skills, and expertise” (2004, p. 104). Videogames have a tendency to emphasize traits. Protagonists of world-savior games are often depicted as people who are uniquely qualified to solve the problems facing the virtual world (Jennings, 2022). This is especially true for the role-playing genre where the steady accumulation of power through the improvement of the player-character's individual traits is often the primary method through which the player's efforts are acknowledged and validated. As a lens for examining representations of leadership, trait-based leadership is indispensable for examining the qualities and skills that *Dragon Age: Inquisition* positions as positive or negative elements of leadership and whether these traits themselves are what constitutes leadership.

### ***Leader-Member Exchange Theory***

In contrast to trait theory and the various behavioral theories that appeared in its wake, leader-member exchange theory emphasizes the relationships that emerge between followers and leaders. Leader-member exchange theory (LMX) “shifted leadership from being viewed as the unidirectional influence of a leader on a group of followers to bidirectional relationships between leaders and each of their subordinates” (Dugan, 2017, p. 151). In essence, LMX positions leaders and followers within a dyadic relationship. In these dyadic relationships, leaders and followers undergo a “leadership-making process” in which the relationship moves through three phases (stranger, acquaintance, and mature partnership) until they develop a relationship where “The individuals can count on each other for loyalty and support. Moreover, the exchanges are not only behavioral, but emotional - mutual respect, trust, and obligation grow throughout the process” (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 230). These qualities make LMX highly applicable to an analysis of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. The interactions between the player-character and NPCs all appear as dyadic relationships in which the player can cultivate the leadership-making process. Relationships are a central focus of *DAI* and leader-member exchange offers a framework for understanding how those connections emerge and develop.

### ***Servant-Leadership***

Unlike trait theory and LMX theory, servant-leadership features minimally in the analysis of *DAI*. However, as the central theory around which my personal conception of leadership has developed, I offer a more in-depth description of its central tenets to provide additional context for my personal interpretation of leadership in *DAI*.

Discussed to a small degree in the preceding chapter, servant-leadership was developed by Robert Greenleaf in the 1970s and describes more of a philosophical view of leadership rather

than an actionable model. Two quotes from Greenleaf's essay *The Servant as Leader* express the core values of this philosophy; the first is a definition, the second is a description of the stance's intended outcomes:

The servant-leader *is* servant first...It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead...

The best test, and difficult to administer, is: do those served grow as persons; do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? *And*, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, will they not be further deprived (Greenleaf, 2008, p. 15).

Servant-leadership is therefore an inherently ethical stance toward leadership and it emphasizes the necessity for the leader to empower their followers and foster their potential to perform leadership, viewing this development itself as the leader's ultimate goal.

As stated, however, critiques of servant-leadership suggest that, because the theory does not identify specific actions or values, its more general philosophy can be appropriated by paternalistic endeavors and conservative political ends (Dugan, 2017, p. 205; Eicher-Catt, 2005). Indeed, servant-leadership can easily be read as contributing to the image of an altruistic hero-leader, paradoxically reviving the romanticized individualism that the theory was intended to counter. However, in its juxtaposition of the terms "servant" and "leader," servant-leadership is intended to be a paradox, simultaneously acknowledging the importance of a guiding influence while suggesting that this influence should be limited. As such, servant-leadership provides a critical awareness that leadership models and practices which seem to propose more ethical and egalitarian values can still contain problematic elements. Considering the practical application of

leadership processes in context is essential, something that must be remembered as we begin to analyze the leadership structures of videogames.

Acting as a leader in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* is a complex task. Players must interact with divergent gameplay systems, role-play with their chosen virtues, and derive meaning from a variety of audiovisual components. Using the paradigm of critical leadership studies and rooted in the values of postheroic leadership, this thesis will use the theories discussed here as lenses that provide a vocabulary and framework through which to interpret the Inquisitor's many possible actions. This analysis will demonstrate that leadership in videogames is not simply a title given to make players feel important. Leadership is always a designed positionality that carries a set of values, politics, and ideologies. As such, it is critical to examine how leadership is implemented in videogames and what messages those implementations convey to players.

## Chapter 3 - Defining Leadership in Videogames

### *Leadership Representations in Media*

Most analyses of leadership in TV and film have approached the topic with the goal of learning lessons about how people can apply leadership styles in their everyday lives. Biehl (2021a) notes that analyzing leadership through media is beneficial because stories “offer insights into the (inner)human complexity of leadership that business management textbooks with anemic models and matrices and superficial case studies cannot” (p. 7). While stories can provide valuable case studies to understand the human element of leadership, there remains a mismatch between how leadership is practiced in the material world and how it is depicted in fiction. Specifically, the advancements made in leadership studies that have critiqued leader-centric perspectives are not necessarily reflected in media depictions. As Joyce Fletcher (2004) states,

While the rhetoric about leadership has changed at the macro level, the everyday narrative about leadership and leadership practices—the stories people tell about leadership, the mythical legends that get passed on as exemplars of leadership behavior—remains stuck in old images of heroic individualism (p. 652).

While Fletcher is referring specifically to the discourse surrounding leaders in the material world, this stance regarding the “stories people tell about leadership” can be extended to the narratives about leadership found in media artifacts.

Media does reflect reality with stories providing compelling examples of how leaders can engage in knowledge creation, consensus building, and decision-making. However, media forms can only ever represent aspects of reality, not its full complexity. Stuart Hall asserts that this consideration is especially relevant for visual mediums where representations can easily become

“iconic signs” that are “vulnerable to being ‘read’ as natural” by an audience, thus concealing how those representations mediate reality (Hall, 2012, p. 805-806). In other words, even when they cannot model the full scope of the social process, the artistic expressions of film, literature, games, and other media use the formal properties of the given medium to construct representations of leadership that appear valid and “natural” according to the expectations of audiences. Adrienne Shaw also addresses this, stating that “in talking about media representation researchers must account for the unique qualities of each medium...The limits, opportunities, and meanings of a given representation are shaped by its production and consumption, as well as how it is encoded and decoded” (Shaw, 2015, p. 22). Thus, approaching leadership representations without considering a given medium’s formal qualities elides how media use the specific affordances of a given form to construct a seemingly “natural” model of leadership processes even though that model is mediated by and filtered through specific ideologies, cultural codes, and methods of production. A brief example from film will help to illustrate this.

### ***Leadership in Film***

Representations of leadership in popular cinema will always be influenced by the medium’s status as a vehicle for conveying story. One of the primary mandates for any storyteller, regardless of medium, is “show don’t tell.” In the widely read screenwriting guidebook *Story*, Robert McKee (1997) emphasizes that this necessitates dramatic action:

Master storytellers never explain. They do the hard, painfully creative thing – they dramatize...A great story authenticates its ideas solely within the dynamics of its events; failure to express a view of life through the pure, honest consequences of human choice and action is a creative defeat no amount of clever language can salvage (p. 114).

This common logic, that stories are propelled forward by the actions of individuals, specifically the core group of characters central to a narrative's scope, has ramifications for leadership's representation in film. Leadership in cinema is dramatized, depicted as the actions of characters who progress the plot and inspire followers as a result of their *individual* actions, not as a confluence of social processes, some of which might be quite banal and undramatic. This is not to say that leadership in cinema is always grandiose and epic in scale. Leadership is not merely the purview of kings and CEOs; it is frequently located in everyday professions and situations.

The 1988 film *Stand and Deliver* offers an example of how leadership tends to be represented by film. Based on a true story, *Stand and Deliver* depicts high school mathematics teacher Jaime Escalante's efforts to educate and inspire a class of underachieving students to take and pass the difficult AP calculus math test. With the students having only the most basic foundation of math knowledge, Escalante enacts a rigorous curriculum that requires months of education. Over the course of the film's events, he and the students struggle with interpersonal tensions, outside factors, and the difficulty of the material. Ultimately, all the students in Escalante's class take the AP test and, after being forced to retake it due to suspicions of cheating, every student passes (Menéndez, 1988). Through this process, Escalante, as depicted by Edward James Olmos, embodies a servant-leader ethos. He empowers the students to believe in themselves when others would write them off and does so not to achieve some reward, but for the purpose of fostering their growth. It is an inspiring and uplifting story, one that is about the power of seemingly small actions to have large impacts on communities.

As is the case with many "true story" movies, however, the film does not fully depict the accurate history of these events. Jaime Escalante was a high school mathematics teacher who believed that his students were capable of achieving more than their circumstances might



otherwise indicate, but he did not succeed in helping all of his students pass the AP Calculus test in a single year. In fact, while he started working at Garfield High School in 1974, he did not teach AP Calculus until 1978, with the first several classes only seeing modest success until the mid-1980s (Ross, 1992, p. 175). Several factors contributed to the eventual success of Escalante's students including the support he received from principal Henry Gradillas, the recruitment of a similarly committed mathematics teacher named Ben Jimenez, and the introduction of algebra courses at the junior high schools that fed into Garfield High School (Jesness, 2002). This infrastructural support provided the pipeline necessary for students at Garfield High School to have the knowledge foundation and resources to succeed.

By all accounts, Escalante was a highly committed individual who fiercely advocated for many of these infrastructural changes (Ross, 1992), and his depiction in *Stand and Deliver* remains true to this spirit. However, the film has limitations by the simple fact of it being a dramatized representation of the truth. It does not have the time to develop the supporting cast of Jimenez and Gradillas, nor is it interested in depicting the slow logistical process of building an effective education pipeline from the ground up. To be clear, I do not think the absence of these real-life elements are necessarily storytelling faults. They are simply the natural consequence of the cinematic medium's need for stories to be dramatic, focused on specific character storylines, and consumable in a 90–150-minute timespan. These qualities contribute to a rendering of *Stand and Deliver*'s "true story" that is leader-centric, depicting Escalante as a heroic figure capable of enacting significant change within an unrealistically short period of time.

Of course, this alone is not revelatory information. It is a readily accepted fact that cinematic portrayals of real-life events will bend reality and make changes so that the messiness of real-life can be experienced in a more coherent form. In spite of this, leadership studies

scholars have generally approached depictions of leadership in media without discussing how the formal qualities of that media will shape those representations. As discussed by Biehl (2021a), stories from film and television can demonstrate the interpersonal interactions and humanness of leadership, factors that mesh well with the visual medium's emphasis on drama and character. However, these qualities do lean toward depicting leader-centricity. Even in examples of cinematic leadership that endeavor to portray follower-centric or dispersed leadership practices, the focus is on how an individual leader, such as Escalante in *Stand and Deliver*, creates those possibilities and not how collective networks establish these processes. To this end, when discussing leadership in media, we must address how specific elements and affordances of any given medium will influence the representations of leadership that appear in that form. Film and television may share an emphasis on character development and drama, for instance, but the serialized and long-form nature of television affords the potential to depict leadership in a more complex manner as its processes can unfold slowly over a greater period of time when compared to the tight structure of cinema.<sup>13</sup> This is why it is essential to offer a description of how leadership emerges in videogames rather than simply drawing on definitions that have already been created.

Leadership as depicted in film and television must be dramatized and the same is true to a certain extent for videogames that emphasize narrative elements. However, videogames' capacity to model procedures and systems and their tendency to position players *as* leaders themselves present distinct opportunities for representing leadership not found in other mediums like film or literature. Asserting that videogames express values through the procedures they afford players, Bogost states that

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<sup>13</sup> For example, one might compare Captain Picard's more deliberated and diplomatic approach to leadership in the television show *Star Trek: Next Generation* with his more action-centered, leader-centric depiction in the cinematic adaptations of that series.

Meaning in videogames is constructed not through a re-creation of the world, but through selectively modeling appropriate elements of that world. Procedural representation models only some subset of a source system, in order to draw attention to that portion as the subject of that representation” (2007, p. 46).

Through the capacity to create meaning by modeling systems and procedures, videogames have the potential to represent leadership as an explicit process, possibly presenting a more accurate reflection of postheroic leadership perspectives. As opposed to film, television, and even literature, videogames might be able to clearly model and depict the complex systems that underlie and contribute to the social process of leadership. Whether they have created such representations or rely on more conventional leader-centric approaches is a central question motivating this research.

### ***Agency and Influence***

Understanding the topic of leadership in videogames requires a brief discussion on the intersecting concept of player agency. As definitions from the previous chapters indicate, leadership is often viewed as a process whereby specific agents who hold power can exercise influence over others (; Alvesson & Spicer, 2012, p. 370; Northouse, 2022, p. 47; Yukl, 2010, p. 3). This is remarkably similar to how agency has been conceptualized in videogames. In *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Janet Murray defines agency as “the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices” (1997, p. 126). Both leaders and players are therefore traditionally presented as actors with unique agential power. Since the release of Murray’s text, agency has been theorized as a core component of videogames with many scholars defining the concept in similar ways (Jennings, 2019, p. 88). Much like leadership, agency in videogames is conventionally understood as an influence process whereby an

individual pursues and achieves desired outcomes. The primary distinction between the two concepts is that agency does not necessarily contain the social element that is core to leadership.

Since the publishing of *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, there have been many critiques of Murray's definition. Some of these even suggest that the pre-designed nature of videogames reduces a player's sense of agency into an illusion (Charles, 2009, p. 286; MacCallum-Stewart & Parsler, 2007). Recent scholarship, however, has questioned the conventional assumptions about agency while also attempting to reconceptualize the concept rather than reject it. Rowan Tulloch (2014) identifies that definitions like Murray's conform to a liberal humanist philosophy in which individual rationality and free will are prized above all else, while Muriel and Crawford (2020) suggest that this view reinforces neoliberalism's emphasis on individualism. Indeed, research on the topic has increasingly pushed for an understanding of agency as "multiple, distributed, and dislocated," drawing on the theories of Actor-Network Theory, Agential Realism, and New Materialism to decenter the player as the sole, or even primary agent within the gameplay experience (Keever, 2021; Muriel & Crawford, 2020, p. 150). Such critiques parallel how critical leadership studies has sought to decenter the individual and hierarchical leader in organizations with both endeavors understanding that agency, and therefore influence, can emerge from a web of interconnected actors with varying positions in a given system.

Through these critiques, it becomes clear that agency, like leadership in the material world, exists as a social myth within game studies. It is an ambiguously defined concept that has historically been deployed in a manner that reinforces neoliberal logics of individualism and meritocracy. This ambiguity gives agency the power to extend across the field, attaining an omnipresence such that it is taken for granted and thus at risk of becoming conceptually blunt. And yet, even as agency's ontological status is critiqued, many game studies scholars still

believe that the concept holds potentially emancipatory power, suggesting that it can be rehabilitated in a way that promotes democratic realities.

Regardless of philosophical stance, descriptions of agency understand it as an influence process. In Murray's definition, it is the player exercising influence over the game. In Keever (2021) and Muriel and Crawford's (2020) perspectives, it is a multi-directional process in which many different agents, whether living or artificial, influence one another simultaneously. The scope of this thesis prevents a full engagement in this discourse, and, as a result, approaches agency in line with Stephanie Jennings's (2019) work, understanding that agency is not the sole purview of the player while simultaneously rejecting the notion that agency in videogames is mere illusion. As Carolyn Jong states, "Even when I am aware that my options are limited, the idea that I have a choice at all still prompts me to take responsibility for my actions and to view those actions as expressions of my own values, goals, or desires" (2013, p. 4). This subjective experience of "agency" or "complicity" (Jennings, 2019, p. 90) affirms that the player's experience of the game, however limited their choices and however diffuse the plurality of agencies are, still matters and generates meaning for the player. In the context of leadership, agency therefore appears when a player develops the sense that they have the capacity to influence the virtual entities within the game world and recognizes this influence as meaningful. The following section will discuss the specific conditions under which this sense of influence can best be described as leadership and how in-game affordances can provoke players into assuming the subjectivity of a player-leader.

### ***The Player-Leader Heuristic***

The endeavor to provide a description for leadership in videogames is rooted in Alvesson & Spicer's (2012) concern for leadership's "conceptual bluntness" (p. 370). For the concept to be

a useful lens through which to examine and make meaning from videogames, it must be distinguishable from other practices. At the same time, the description provided here should not be applied as a prescriptive evaluation. Rather, it is best understood as a heuristic framework for locating the in-game conditions under which the player of a game can be subjectivized into taking on the player-leader subjectivity. It should be noted that the scope of this thesis is not sufficient to properly address the potential for nonhuman agencies to enact leadership in single-player videogames. As such, this framework deemphasizes other agentic forces, such as the game itself and virtual entities, to center and explore the specific positionality and affordances of the player-leader. With these understandings, I offer the following description:

Leadership in games emerges from a variety of procedural systems. Through those systems players make choices that influence other entities (companions, groups, factions, allies, and enemies) involved in the game system and in doing so express a set of values.

This framework provides several useful elements for distinguishing leadership from other in-game actions while also covering a conceptual territory that is not overly restrictive.

Fundamentally, this heuristic describes leadership as a process that players engage in by interacting with the gameplay mechanics and designed rule systems provided by the game. Through this engagement, players enter a ludic subject-position that is “shaped by the capabilities and limitations the player is granted, the fit between these capabilities and the gameworld, and the goals they are set or allowed to set for themselves” (Vella, 2021, p. 440). Essentially, the tasks and goals that a game sets for the player and the player’s range of possible actions for performing those tasks subjectivize them into assuming a particular “way of being” (Vella, 2021) that encourages certain behaviors through tone, narrative, and procedural affordances. As stated by Sicart (2009), “the game provides a context and a set of principles that,

when accepted by the player, create a subjectivity” (p. 68). When these elements are oriented toward depicting influence processes between the player and other virtual entities, this identity-construction process can extend into the subjectivization of the player-leader identity. The player-leader accepts responsibility for those entities who act as their followers, believing that their choices have meaningful consequences for these virtual beings.

This sense of responsibility is the critical quality of the player-leader and is primarily achieved through engagement with in-game choices. Through their rule systems and the obstacles they present, videogames make demands on players, requiring them to complete certain tasks to progress through and “win” a game (Garite, 2003; Juul, 2005, p. 5). Even within the limitations of videogames’ directed freedom, players make choices about how they proceed through those challenges. As players progress through any game, they are confronted with numerous choices, from aesthetic decisions about how their character dresses to instrumental choices like what weapon to use to defeat an enemy to moral judgments that affect a game’s narrative events. This back-and-forth between a game’s demands and the player’s choices creates a relationship that Smethurst and Craps (2014) describe as “interreactivity,” replacing the unidirectional “interactive” with an acknowledgement that “both player and game react to one another in a feedback loop” (p. 273). They go on to suggest that this interreactivity “fosters the sense that players have a responsibility for what happens on-screen,” especially in relation to moral choices that appear in games (p. 277). In other words, players make choices within the context of a game and understand that they are responsible for the consequences that follow from those decisions, even if those decisions are constrained by the directed freedom of a game. Critically, the player-leader’s responsibility extends to their followers, recognizing that they are also accountable for how their choices affect other entities in the game system. The player-leader

subjectivity is therefore a disposition directed toward in-game choices, one that experiences a sense of agency that is primarily characterized by the feeling of responsibility for followers. Not every choice in a game has to do with leadership, however, and the following elements of the heuristic are vital for identifying in-game processes as leadership: influence and values.

Influence has already been identified as one of the pillars of contemporary leadership definitions and it is an implicit component of most definitions of agency in videogames. That being said, these two contexts understand influence in slightly different ways with this heuristic approaching influence primarily through the lens of leadership theory. In its most straightforward sense, influence in leadership processes is understood as “how the leader affects followers and the communication that occurs between leaders and followers” (Northouse, p. 46). Influence requires the presence of followers, aligning with descriptions of leadership that view followers as active and integral members of group processes (Hollander, 1992; Shamir, 2007; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). In this way, choices in videogames that do not involve, relate to, or affect other virtual entities who enact followership behaviors are not likely to be understood as leadership behaviors and therefore less likely to contribute to the player-leader subjectivity. For example, a hostile enemy combatant is unlikely to enact followership behaviors in relation to the player-character, preventing players from developing a sense of responsibility for those characters and making it all but impossible to assume the player-leader subjectivity in relation to them. Choices that allow players to influence other virtual entities, whether it be supporting one character over another in a narrative scene or attempting to recruit an enemy rather than fight them during combat, are more likely to induce the player-leader subjectivity. The dynamics of such choices make players aware that they are responsible for influencing the lives of beings who matter within the context



of the game world. Thus, the player-leader subjectivity is relational, existing in connection to entities that enact followership behaviors.

Although leadership as a concept may be value-neutral, the practice of leadership always contains a set of values or normative ethics (Dugan, 2017, p. 8). As such, any act of leadership in videogames expresses values. This element serves as the primary distinction between in-game actions that might be considered leadership and those that are best understood as management. Leadership is generally understood as a relational practice related to dialogue and sensemaking (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Biehl, 2021; Yukl, 2010). In contrast, management is more instrumental in nature, goal-oriented, and focused on logistical coordination (Dugan, 2017 p. 145; Yukl, 2010, p. 7). Management therefore remains an important component of supporting leadership pursuits though it is more closely tied to positional authority and lacks the focus on relational meaning-making of leadership's influence behaviors. Thus, actions that relate to leadership in games are best conceptualized as those choices that express some set of values, moral code, or ethical standpoint; they allow players to engage in this relational meaning-making process. Meanwhile, management behaviors do involve entities other than the player-character, but they exclusively or primarily center task-completion. Choices that allow players to express leadership values or validate certain ethical perspectives subjectivize players into taking on the player-leader subjectivity by making them responsible for the articulation of a worldview that other entities will respond to. These values-based choices are relevant to the player-leader subjectivization process when they influence other virtual beings, something that can be reflected in the game's procedural or narrative domain.

For player-leaders to develop a sense of responsibility for how their values-based choices influence followers, the game should demonstrate how those choices influence the game world

and its inhabitants. This can be achieved through changes in the narrative or procedural domain. As a hypothetical, imagine that a role-playing videogame requires the player to choose between supporting one of two NPC characters in contention for the throne of a fantasy kingdom. One of the characters presents themselves as a firm military commander while the other claims to be a shrewd diplomat. Whoever the player chooses to support will become the new monarch with the choice influencing the lives of the two NPCs and the population of the kingdom while also expressing values about what kind of person should hold that position of power. This choice becomes reflected in the game's narrative domain when that character becomes crowned as the new ruler. Future interactions with characters may lead NPCs to mention that character's new title; the player may even learn about the monarch's distant deeds from other characters, or they may hear rumors about how the NPC who failed to acquire the throne has fled the country. These changes would reinforce the notion that the player's choice has had an influence on the virtual world and the various entities living within it.

Procedurally, the consequences of this decision can be modeled in numerous ways. The player may receive a distinct powerful item from the character they choose to support as a token of thanks, a reward that then becomes a reminder of the player-leader's choice when they use it in the future. The choice may also affect a game's morality system if it contains one like *Mass Effect's* Paragon and Renegade meters or *Fallout 3's* Karma mechanic, positioning the player-character along different moral axes and potentially affecting how other NPCs interact with them. Or the player may encounter this monarch again later in the game, resulting in different quests or conversations than if they had chosen the alternative.

Each of the consequences described might appear within a game, and they can contribute to the significance of the player's responsibility in varying ways. Of these representations, I

argue that those appearing in the procedural domain are more likely to cement the player-leader subjectivity than those that appear in the narrative domain. Daniel Vella (2021) identifies that a player's ludic subjectivity is strongly influenced by the "range of possible behaviors" (p. 443) afforded by a game's procedural domain. Affecting how the player interacts with the procedural systems of the game therefore directly impacts how they interact with the process of leadership and engage in the player-leader subjectivity. Through the procedural domain, the feedback of leadership choices is made more consistently apparent and tangible to the player, deepening the player-leader's experience of agency and, consequently, their sense of responsibility.

This is not to say that the narrative domain does not hold a significant role in the subjectivization process. Sicart (2013) claims that the semiotic domain is essential for contextualizing the affordances of the procedural domain (p. 87). This is also true for the narrative domain and is made apparent by how videogame stories often cast players in the explicit role of leaders. Occupying designated "leader" roles is not a requirement for the practice of leadership (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012 p. 377; Collinson, 2011, p. 182; DeRue & Ashford, 2010), but the roles of "captain," "king," or even "manager" carry with them specific connotations related to positional power (Northouse, 2022, p. 55) and the wielding of authority. Such titles frequently appear in reference to player-characters and videogames often use them as narrative justification for granting players access to gameplay mechanics that model processes of leadership. For example, in *Fable III* the player-character's primary goal is to overthrow a tyrannical king. Once this goal is achieved, the player-character becomes the monarch themselves. Upon achieving this position, the player must then rule the kingdom of Albion by holding court and making decisions that affect the population, a mechanic they did not have access to prior to ascending the throne. Through this process, *Fable III*'s narrative domain

contextualizes the player's new role as "king" or "queen," legitimizing their access to new procedural affordances that invoke the positional power of that role.

A player-character need not occupy such a role for them to engage in the process of leadership, but the presence of these roles can contribute significantly to the assumption of the player-leader subjectivity. If the game addresses the player-character explicitly as a "leader," a "captain," or a similar title commonly associated with leadership, then it is effectively granting the identity of leader to the player (DeRue & Ashford, 2010, p. 631-632). This may incline players to view the actions they take while inhabiting that role as engaging in the process of leadership, even if they are more closely aligned with management behaviors. Here it is vital to remember that actions rarely manifest as "purely" leadership or management; either can contain elements of the other (Alvesson & Spicer, 2014, p. 42). The lines drawn to distinguish these processes therefore are flexible, not rigid, offering a heuristic that supports critical examination of the game elements through which leadership and management emerge as distinct though interconnected processes.

These examples also demonstrate that there is not a clean break between the consequences that appear in the narrative and procedural domains. Sometimes a change that appears in the game's narrative will also bleed into the procedural domain, or vice versa. Sometimes a change in one will be more prominent than the other and sometimes they will be equally weighted. Furthermore, although videogames often strive to provide meaningful consequences to important decisions, there are many games that promise to depict significant change in response to a player's choices and then fail to deliver on that promise. Sometimes a decision that seems like it should have profound impact on the virtual world has barely any at all.

In these instances, it may be tempting to view choice as an illusion, especially considering how players' decisions are always constrained by a game's directed freedom. However, I would like to once again echo Jong's statements on agency, noting that even if a player's decisions do not lead to major consequences a game may still effectively subjectivize players into assuming the player-leader subjectivity if the player is prompted to "take responsibility for [their] actions and to view those actions as expressions of [their] own values, goals, or desires" (Jong, 2013, p. 4). That sense of complicity and responsibility for making a choice that affects a virtual community, and the earnest engagement in the process of choosing, is what matters most to the player-leader subjectivity. This is reflected in the heuristic's emphasis on processes that the player engages in rather than the outcomes of those processes. The player-leader discovers dynamic meaning in games through the exploration of choice, the expression of leadership values, and the earnest belief that their decisions matter for the lives of those who act as their followers.

This discussion provides several useful considerations for identifying the gameplay processes that produce the player-leader subjectivity. It is essential to remember, however, that this description is a framework, not a prescriptive definition. In-game scenarios may involve only some of these components and still generate the player-leader subjectivity, while the presence of all of them may only manifest the player-leader for small stretches of time. Some games involve players acting in leadership roles in relation to communities throughout an entire game while others may feature such processes for brief segments. Games that make players consistently accountable to a community of followers through their procedural systems are more likely to engender an enduring player-leader subjectivity due to the steady feedback that reminds them of their responsibility to that community. This is critical because leadership as it appears in

single-player videogames must not be understood in a binary sense. It is not as simple as, “this game contains affordances for leadership behaviors” and “this game does not involve themes of leadership.” Furthermore, while the player-leader is primarily characterized by their sense of responsibility, any game that subjectivizes players into that position will associate different qualities, traits, and values with the player-leader. Leadership in videogames appears as a spectrum that can vary depending on what kind of behaviors are afforded by the game’s procedural systems and how a game’s narrative elements contextualize the role of the player-character. The usefulness of this framework will be demonstrated in the following section where I discuss examples that both validate and strain this heuristic.

### ***Examples and Discussion***

The heuristic offered in this chapter can be juxtaposed against the original definition mentioned in the literature review chapter:

An act of leadership in a videogame involves the player making an in-game choice that has an observable and lasting impact on the virtual world.

This previous definition did acknowledge the centrality of player choice to the leadership process, but it also attempted to identify leadership based purely on outcomes and contained no accounting for the social nature of the concept. Simply put, it was too vague. Using that description, one might understand exploring the worlds of the adventure game series *Metroid* as leadership almost as easily as building a functioning society in the city-building strategy game *Frostpunk*. The new definition, however, cannot be so universally applied.

In the *Metroid* game series, players assume the role of Samus Aran, a fearless intergalactic bounty hunter who explores vast alien worlds. As they progress through each game, players alter the landscape in permanent ways to make traversal through the hostile world easier.

Such actions constitute an “observable and lasting impact on the virtual world.” Under the conditions of the previous definition, these actions could be considered as falling under the umbrella of leadership. However, the new definition clarifies this issue, primarily by centering the importance of followers. While Samus Aran performs courageous and admirable actions that save the galaxy from ruin, there are no entities who enact followership behaviors, the player has no way to influence entities beyond combat mechanics, and they also lack access to choices that allow them to express ethical values. This demonstrates how the new heuristic rectifies issues with the previous definition: the lack of followers throughout the game means that it is highly unlikely for games in the *Metroid* franchise to produce the player-leader subjectivity in players.

*Call of Duty* is another franchise that is unlikely to invoke the player-leader for similar reasons. In this military-themed first-person shooter, the player often takes the “lead” in terms of being the first to move through a level, however, they rarely interact with the other virtual entities who accompany them. There are moments of dialogue between companions that can establish the sense of familiarity that might lead a player to feel close to their allies, but there are no procedural representations for players to purposefully engage them or make choices that influence them. At the same time, these allies direct the player-character through the environment, ordering players to perform specific actions. This requires players to, more often than not, act as followers rather than leaders. The resulting relationship contains a command-and-control dynamic where the player has virtually no affordances for exercising influence or expressing values. While this may not lead to the emergence of the player-leader subjectivity, such level design does reinforce rhetorics related to the commanding hierarchy of the military. Thus, even in a game where players are not subjectivized into becoming the player-leader, the

leadership heuristic remains a useful tool for examining how games convey meaning through the player's relationship with other virtual entities.

Using this admittedly brief assessment of *Call of Duty* it might be inferred that first-person shooters do not allow the player to assume the player-leader subjectivity due to their generally high level of directed freedom. However, one cannot make assumptions about leadership affordances purely based on a game's genre. *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six Vegas* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2006) and *Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway* (Gearbox Software, 2008) are tactical first-person shooters in which players act as the leader of a military squad with the ability to order fellow soldiers around the battlefield. Players in these games hold positional authority as contextualized by the narrative domain and influence followers who will react to the player's commands, moving to different positions on the battlefield or targeting specific enemies based on the player-character's orders. Through this engagement, the game encourages players to develop a sense of responsibility for their AI-controlled followers and this might lead to the assumption of the player-leader subjectivity. However, this subjectivity is likely to be limited and weaker than games like *Dragon Age: Inquisition* or *Frostpunk* given that *Rainbow Six Vegas*'s affordances for influencing other entities mostly correspond to the logics of management and not the expression of values. It is important to remember though that the leadership heuristic describes a spectrum, not a binary, and this means that such squad-based tactical shooters do afford players some connections to the player-leader subjectivity through their explicit naming of the player's role and their engagement in leadership-adjacent (read: management) behaviors. It is also clear, however, that this player-leader subject will exist within a rigid hierarchical structure that values always obeying direct orders. Unlike *DAI*, where players can choose to talk with their



companions outside of combat and help them grow as people, these games reify militaristic masculinity through their narrow leadership affordances.

Games that allow the player-leader subjectivity to emerge do not always have such narrow affordances, and examples such as *Frostpunk* can offer near-constant opportunities to adopt a more nuanced subject position. *Frostpunk* (11 bit studios, 2018) places players in the role of “Captain” of a post-apocalyptic city. From this position, they must decide what buildings to construct, which laws to create, and how best to maintain civil society in the harsh, frozen environment. The player’s decisions express ethical perspectives about how a society should be structured and have significant influence in the procedural system by affecting the approval of their community with the game’s primary goal being to keep approval high while also ensuring the population’s survival. If this approval level drops too low, however, the player-character is ousted from the role of “Captain” and exiled from the community, resulting in a game over. Through this design, the player is constantly held accountable for the choices they make as a leader. Importantly, unlike in *Rainbow Six: Vegas* which allows players to restart every mission until they successfully lead their squad through the game’s challenges, the player’s leadership in *Frostpunk* can fail. *Frostpunk* thus presents players with a high degree of flexibility in making values-based choices that will influence the virtual community of followers while also constantly reminding players of the consequences for their potential failure, emphasizing their responsibility for the community. This combination of factors is likely to consistently subjectivize players into becoming player-leaders.

Through these processes, leadership in games is allowed to be both simple and boring, as well as epic and inspiring. Sometimes players make a choice that will impact the entire fictional world, and sometimes they have an optional conversation with a character who just wants to chat

about their favorite food. Any videogame can be analyzed using the frameworks of game studies and leadership studies in conjunction with the player-leader heuristic to understand the values being communicated through their designed affordances for leadership behaviors or lack thereof.

There are also examples of videogames that complicate this heuristic. *Fallout 3* is a post-apocalyptic open-world RPG in which players take on the role of the Lone Wanderer (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008). In this game, players have the opportunity to pursue numerous quests that engage their ethical reasoning and involve choices that have consequences for the game's virtual world and the beings that inhabit it. Unlike the previously mentioned examples, the degree to which the player-leader subjectivity is made available to players can vary significantly from moment to moment within the game. Two quests demonstrate this variability.

“Tenpenny Tower” is a quest in *Fallout 3* that presents players with an ethical conundrum (Sicart, 2013, p. 96-97). Two factions in this location are in conflict, the elitist residents of the tower led by Alistair Tenpenny, and a community of sentient ghouls<sup>14</sup> living in the surrounding area. The two groups are starting to become increasingly aggressive toward one another as the residents of Tenpenny Tower try to exterminate the ghouls while the ghouls attempt to negotiate their entrance into the tower's community (*Tenpenny Tower (quest)*, n.d.). Left to their own devices, these factions cannot resolve their differences and leaders of both communities approach the player-character, hoping to procure their services. It is up to the player to discover this location, intervene, and decide the resolution to this conflict.

The player-character does not occupy a specified leadership position in this situation, but the social beings that make up the factions will recognize the Lone Wanderer's authority and accept their influence, enacting followership behaviors. Completing the quest can involve numerous conversations and interactions with members of each faction prior to making a final

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<sup>14</sup> Humans who became irradiated during the nuclear apocalypse and now have a monstrous appearance.

decision, requiring the player to engage with, listen to, and become responsible for the community. This quest engages leadership as a process, the player's ethical values, and entails developing the community members of Tenpenny Tower into one's followers, albeit for a brief time before deciding the quest's outcome. The fact that the player does not end up leading any faction after this decision makes the presence of followers only a temporary occurrence within the context of the quest, but several elements of the heuristic are present and can thus cue the emergence of the player-leader subject.

Other quests in *Fallout 3* do not involve such processes, even when they necessitate making moral choices. One such example is the "Power of the Atom" which involves the town of Megaton. This village was constructed around an immense unexploded nuclear bomb that provides power to the nascent society. In a discomfoting twist, the player can learn that the nuclear bomb is still active. While players can disarm the bomb as advocated by the town's sheriff, they are also approached by a man representing Allistair Tenpenny who requests the player set up a device that will detonate it (*The Power of the Atom*, n.d.). Players must make a choice between activating the bomb and earning the favor of Tenpenny or disarming it to ensure the safety of Megaton.

In the context of the leadership heuristic, this presents a conundrum. The quest does have observable consequences for numerous entities – the residents of Megaton and the organization urging you to activate the device. However, completing this quest does not require engagement in leadership processes of communication, sensemaking, or even management. Most of the actions for completing the quest involve interacting with the bomb itself rather than the people connected to the device. The player is presented with an ethical choice that involves some articulation of values, but the quest does not involve influencing other NPCs. The player cannot,

for example, convince Allistair Tenpenny to abandon his scheme by arguing that the town of Megaton is worth preserving. “Power of the Atom” thus involves some elements of the leadership heuristic, but does not engage them to the same degree as the “Tenpenny Tower” quest and it is therefore less likely to subjectivize players into becoming a player-leader.

*Fallout 3* is a complex case for the examination of leadership in games because it does not conform to one side of the spectrum. Previous examples maintain a consistent engagement with the theme of leadership, even if that engagement is limited: *Metroid Prime* does not contain many themes of leadership, *Rainbow Six Vegas* engages with the concept to a narrow degree, and *Frostpunk* emphasizes it continuously through its core design. *Fallout 3*'s investment in the topic, on the other hand, is variable.

This is due in large part to the game's central premise. Unlike the community leaders of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* or *Frostpunk*, *Fallout 3* is a story about the player-character's mostly lonesome journey through the post-apocalyptic wasteland. There is the potential for players to attain followers by befriending companions who will aid in combat and engage the player in dialogue. However, it is entirely possible for the player to ignore these companions and proceed through the world on their own. At the same time, certain quests require players to become involved in complex social situations and engage processes that can generate the responsibility associated with the player-leader subjectivity. These situations are localized to specific contexts in *Fallout 3* while *DAI* and *Frostpunk* feature a player-character who consistently invests themselves in a single community and can watch that community develop or fall apart over time depending on the player-leader's actions. As a result, the player-leader subjectivity that emerges

in *Fallout 3* is likely to be subtle and inconsistent with players moving in and out of that subject position as they explore the game world.<sup>15</sup>

Through these descriptions, it becomes clear that leadership in games is not binary. It is a spectrum, one which can vary even within single games. Some games involve many elements of leadership while others do not. Some genres lend themselves to modeling leadership behaviors more than others. The mechanics of party management and engagement with companions indicate that most RPGs implicate some themes of leadership, while action games and shooters may need to move beyond genre conventions to address the player-leader subject. As previously discussed, it is better to think of the elements presented here as a descriptive framework for examining how leadership emerges in videogames rather than a prescriptive definition. Some games do implement themes of leadership, but to a small degree, with a narrow set of values, and without much potential for player appropriation of those values. Nevertheless, as has been demonstrated, analysis of the leadership values expressed by these games can still be fruitful.

These considerations make *Dragon Age: Inquisition* an excellent case study for this topic. Unlike some of the aforementioned games, *DAI* puts players in an unambiguous position of leadership. While such a position is not essential for the emergence of the player-leader subjectivity, this situation ensures that the game provides a clear model of how procedural systems can combine with narrative context to model leadership processes. The game also features several intersecting systems that engage each component of the leadership heuristic. NPC companions provide a clear foundation for examining the player's influence, there are

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<sup>15</sup> This element of *Fallout 3* where players enter communities with ongoing issues and then almost immediately attain the authority to decide what is best for the community demonstrates a "power fantasy" (Muriel & Crawford, 2020) that reifies player agency over other agentic beings in the virtual world. A deeper analysis of leadership in *Fallout 3* would have to examine the consequences of this ideology that seems to position the player-character as de-facto authority, and thus ultimate leader of the Wasteland, even as they do not belong to or represent any community.

numerous mechanics that emphasize the player-character's accountability to a central community, and this wide possibility space ensures that players have flexibility in choosing how they pursue and embody leadership values. These elements constantly remind players that their choices as a leader are having an impact on their followers and the world around them, generating the sense of responsibility essential to the player-leader subjectivity. The player is thus continuously subjectivized into occupying the player-leader subject position.

In ways both subtle and obvious, the act of playing *Dragon Age: Inquisition* is a near-constant immersion in the process of leadership. Whether completing quests, engaging in dialogue with other characters, or managing companions' equipment, elements of leadership emerge in virtually every aspect of the game. The following chapters deconstruct and explore how these processes appear in the game, what values those manifestations communicate to the player, and the affordances available to players for engaging leadership outside the game's predefined systems.

## Chapter 4 - The Inquisitor

Before discussing the procedural mechanics that constitute leadership actions in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, we must first describe the leader identity that players assume in the game. Like most BioWare games, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* emphasizes its narrative and characters, and these elements play a significant role in subjectivizing players into the player-leader role. This chapter describes how the game's prologue and inciting incident highlight the player-character's individuality and uniqueness to contextualize them as a world-savior figure. This context persists throughout the rest of the game's story, acting as a justification for why the player has access to power and authority that other characters do not. Such a presentation associates the player-leader of *DAI* with a set of attributes and qualities that conform to the leader-centricity of trait theory. After explicating the historical developments of trait theory, I use Stogdill's 1974 survey of leadership traits to frame an analysis of how *DAI* presents a romanticized image of individual leaders. Through this analysis, I identify that, while *Dragon Age: Inquisition* occasionally references collectivist ideals, the constructed identity of the Inquisitor ultimately privileges individualistic and neoliberal approaches to leadership.

### ***The Breach and the Herald***

*Dragon Age: Inquisition* begins with chaos. The game's title screen depicts the Mages and Templars, two factions within the continent of Thedas, marching toward the Temple of Sacred Ashes where their leaders will attempt to negotiate a peaceful settlement to the ongoing war that began after the events of *Dragon Age II*. When players hit the start button, the screen flashes white as an explosion rips the temple apart. The blast results in the death of Divine Justinia, the religious leader most capable of restoring peace to Thedas and causes a massive

mystical rift into the Fade<sup>16</sup> called the Breach to appear above the temple. This event has opened additional smaller fade rifts across Thedas through which dangerous demons continuously emerge to wreak havoc upon the world. The people of Thedas are in dire need of a hero, a savior, a leader.

Players step into this chaos through the positionality of the Inquisitor, though it will be many hours before they receive that title. At the beginning of the game, the player-character is merely a prisoner suspected of causing the explosion and opening the Breach due to the eerie green glow of a Mark on their left hand that sparks whenever new demons emerge from the rift. Cassandra Pentaghast, a warrior who acts in the name of Divine Justina, presents the player-character with an ultimatum: use the Mark to help close the Breach or die.

While *Dragon Age: Inquisition* may introduce its player-character in a scenario that places them far from any kind of leadership position, it does not take long for the game to contextualize the player's authority. After fighting through a swarm of demons, meeting the elf-mage Solas and dwarf-rogue Varric, NPC companions who join your party,<sup>17</sup> and learning that the Mark can close smaller fade rifts, players encounter a group of soldiers stationed close to the Breach led by Chancellor Roderick. Suspicious of the player-character, Roderick argues for their immediate execution while Cassandra states that the Mark is needed to stop the Breach. However, Cassandra is indecisive about whether to march directly toward the Breach or to take a more circular path in the hopes of rescuing a group of lost scouts. Roderick calls Cassandra a thug while she calls him a bureaucrat, making it immensely clear that cooperation between the two has completely broken down. With no higher authority to turn to, Cassandra approaches you,

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<sup>16</sup> In the *Dragon Age* universe, magic comes from people's ability to draw energy from the Fade, a dreamlike dimension from which demons occasionally emerge to possess magic wielders and sow chaos in the physical world.

<sup>17</sup> The "party" is a common concept in RPGs and refers to the group of characters that players have control over when engaging in gameplay (Baerg, 2012, p. 169).



the player-character and ostensibly her prisoner, and asks how the assault should proceed (Figure 4.1). If the player-character asks why it is their responsibility to choose, Solas responds matter-of-factly: “You have the Mark” (BioWare, 2014). This is the first instance of a leadership identity claim in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* and it occurs within an hour of the game’s start.



Figure 4.1 - The first moment of leader identity construction in DAi: the player's first choice (BioWare, 2014).

In exploring how the relationships between leaders and followers develop, DeRue and Ashford suggest that leadership is coconstructed through a process of identity claiming and granting. Essentially, leaders can claim the leadership identity by actively naming themselves “leaders” or through indirect actions that suggest leadership while followers can grant the leader identity through similarly direct verbal appeals or indirect methods such as deferring to a person’s influence attempt and thereby acknowledging their status as leader (DeRue & Ashford, 2010, p. 631-632). The person whose identity is in question is referred to as a “focal person” and these same processes can occur for coconstructing a follower identity as well (DeRue & Ashford, 2010, p. 632). In the instance described above, the Inquisitor becomes the focal person for a leadership identity construction process.

While Cassandra does not directly verbalize the word “leader,” her deference to the player-character indicates a willingness to follow, constituting a followership behavior through which the leader identity is offered to the player-character. From here, Solas’s comment acts as a type of “collective endorsement” that reinforces and stabilizes the leader identity (DeRue & Ashford, 2010, p. 629). This statement also indicates that the identity is granted based on a trait that the player-character possesses. Importantly, the player cannot deny this identity. Regardless of how they feel about the authority thrust upon them, players must make a choice that is then followed by the group. This choice has precious little consequence for the game and expresses only a minimal degree of values by allowing the player to prioritize the efficiency of resolving the danger of the Breach or the communal focus of saving the scouts. However, the narrative context surrounding the decision and the responsabilization of the player in this moment calls forth the first instance of the player-leader subjectivity in the game.

From this point, players lead their companions through the mountains, defeat a powerful demon, and use their Mark to stall the Breach’s growth. While the Breach and fade rifts remain active, the player-character has granted Thedas a brief reprieve, earning them profound respect from a subset of the population, as well as the ire of many more such as Chancellor Roderick. It is in this position that the player-character is bestowed their first title: “The Herald of Andraste,” a reference to the miracle of their survival at the Temple and their power to seal fade rifts. Cassandra and her ally Leliana use their authority as former advisors to Divine Justinia to declare a new Inquisition, partnering with the Herald to close the Breach and restore order to Thedas.<sup>18</sup>

This Inquisition is an organization that is unaffiliated with any nation or existing power structure, designed so that it can act independently of national interests and respond quickly to

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<sup>18</sup> The scenes leading up to this point will be referred to as the game’s “prologue” because they set the stage for the overarching story and act as a linear tutorial that teaches players how to play the game before it begins in earnest.

dangerous threats. Leliana states that its former incarnation was composed of “people who banded together to restore order in a world gone mad” (BioWare, 2014). This historical precedence sets the stage for the new Inquisition, establishing a military-minded organization made up of loose alliances between disparate groups that have joined together to fight for a common cause. A nefarious force has thrust Thedas into chaos and the world faces an imminent, world-threatening conflict. As the Herald of Andraste, it is now the player-character’s responsibility to form alliances, negotiate the power structures of the Inquisition, and work together with their companions to defeat this evil.

### ***Leader Identification***

Before we discuss the processes by which players engage in leadership, we must address how the game’s narrative domain provides context for what it means to be a “leader.” The story of *DAI* does not immediately invest the player-character with the positional authority of leading the Inquisition. Leliana speaks to the dire situation of the organization immediately after it is declared, noting that “We aren’t ready. We have no leader, no numbers, and now no Chantry support” (BioWare, 2014). This sentiment that the Inquisition has no leader is repeated several times throughout the first act of the game with some NPCs even commenting on the actions of Cassandra as if she were the organization’s leader. It is not until the Inquisition faces its first significant defeat and the player-character makes a heroic stand against the main antagonist Corypheus that the player-character is presented with the official title of Inquisitor, undergoing a second and much more explicit leadership identity construction process. In this second instance of identity granting, Cassandra states “The Inquisition requires a leader: the one who has *already* been leading it...There would be no Inquisition without you. How it will serve, how you lead: that must be yours to decide” (Figure 4.2). Here, the narrative domain presents the role of

leadership as something that must be granted by a community, reflecting a social constructionist view of leadership (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012, p. 373; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 84). However, this perspective is undermined by the game's procedural domain.

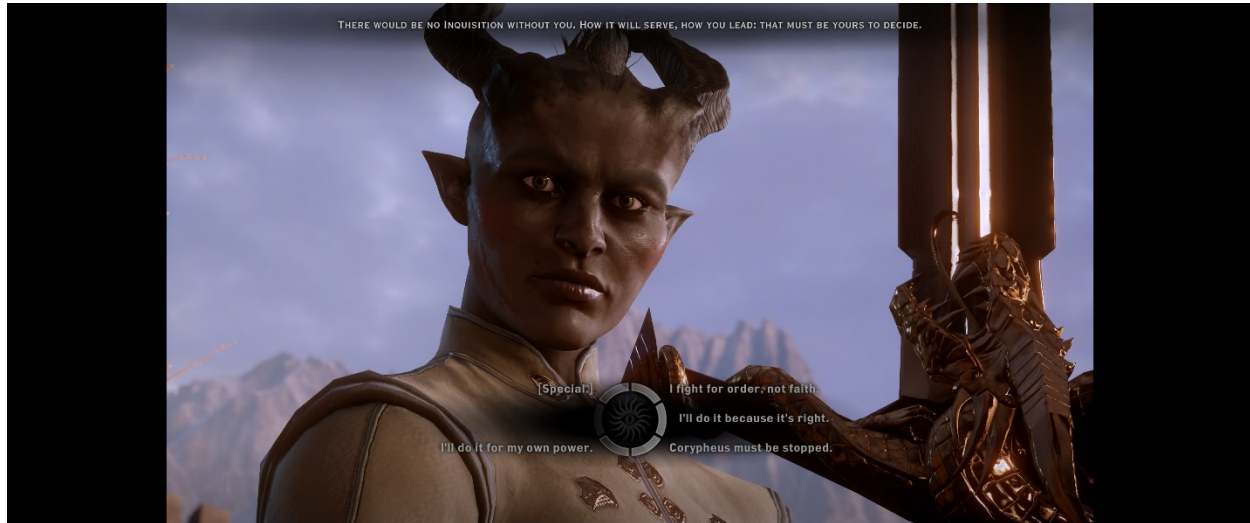


Figure 3.2 - *DAI* and its NPCs officially recognize the player-character as "Inquisitor," allowing them to "dedicate" the Inquisition to a set of values (BioWare, 2014).

Although the player-character may not hold the official title of Inquisitor for over a dozen hours,<sup>19</sup> they have access to the authority of a leader role immediately after the game's prologue. From this point, players can manage the inventory and skill development of companions in their party, delegate tasks to their advisors through the Inquisition War Table,<sup>20</sup> and are made immediately responsible for forging alliances to strengthen the Inquisition. Thus, while the player may not hold the explicit position of leader in the narrative domain, they are already able to exercise influence and engage in leader behaviors. Indeed, these are all the same responsibilities that players will hold after receiving the title of Inquisitor. Once they receive that title, the most significant addition to their repertoire of influence behaviors is the Judgment system that allows them to decide the fates of high-ranking enemy prisoners. Aside from that,

<sup>19</sup> For the sake of simplicity, the player-character of *DAI* will primarily be referred to simply as the "Inquisitor."

<sup>20</sup> The War Table will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 5: The Inquisition. Management of party members is discussed in Chapter 7: The Player as Leader.

much of the player-leader's procedural affordances in this first act mirror those that are available later in the game despite their eventual occupation of a more defined leadership role.

Through this, *DAI* seems to be marking a distinction between leadership practices and leader roles. Simply because the player-character does not hold an official title does not mean they are unable to engage in leadership processes. The hierarchical title of Inquisitor is not what makes the player-character a leader, their actions do. Yet, there remains a tension between the narrative domain's assertion that the Inquisition lacks a leader and the procedural domain's tacit recognition of the player-character's management authority and capacity to influence. If the Inquisition does not have a leader, why does the Herald already wield the most authority at the start of the game? The player does not have to earn access to the War Table or prove that they are reasonable enough to manage their party member's inventory, they are a priori granted the right to this authority. These game mechanics are therefore construed as natural extensions of the player-character's positionality. In other words, while the narrative domain of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* may not explicitly acknowledge the player-character as a leader, the game does rationalize their access to leadership behaviors through the acknowledgement of their specialness. To invoke Solas's previous comment: you have the Mark, therefore you have the right to lead.

After the events of the game's prologue, the player-character has become famous across Thedas and various communities and dignitaries now seek audience with them less out of a genuine desire to form alliances and more out of curiosity to inspect the so-called "Herald" firsthand. This fame will grow throughout the game as the player completes quests and accomplishes renowned achievements, but even in this early stage they are recognized as an influential figure. Like so many other videogames, the player-character is thus identified as a

uniquely special “world-savior.” As stated by Jennings (2022), world-savior characters in videogames are singled out as the only individuals “capable of bringing salvation to imperiled universes,” a positionality that is emphasized by the fact that the decisions about how to go about performing that salvation “belong exclusively to the world-savior, but not to NPCs, social groups, governing institutions or consensus-building bodies” (p. 329-330). While the title “Herald” may not denote an authoritative leader role, the term assigns a messianic image to the player-character, thus justifying the de facto authority that the player automatically wields. Seen through this light, *Dragon Age: Inquisition*’s narrative and procedural domains work in tandem to rationalize the player-character’s immediate access to authority not by their hierarchical title, but also not by their engagement in collective processes. Rather, the player-character is positioned as having an innate set of traits that, as ordained savior of the world, give them the right to occupy a leadership role ahead of any NPC in the game.

*Dragon Age: Inquisition* itself engages in the leadership identity construction process by granting the player access to the leader identity through its mechanics, eventually positioning them in an explicit leadership role. Players then claim this identity by virtue of playing the game and inhabiting that role, initiating the player-leader subjectivization process. Critically, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* begins subjectivizing players into assuming the player-leader role by foregrounding the player-character’s special significance to the narrative, thereby framing the player-leader subjectivity as an individualistic hero-leader. This subjectivization process is extended by the association of this player-character, and therefore the player-leader, with conventional leadership traits. Thus, to understand the full context of how leadership in *DAI* emerges, we must identify the qualities of leadership that are validated by the game’s narrative context and the directed freedom of its procedural systems.

### ***Trait Theory and the Inquisitor***

The creation of trait-based theories and models that distinguish leaders from nonleaders is one of the oldest themes in leadership scholarship (Zaccaro, 2014, p. 14). At its core, trait theory of leadership is straightforward: it presumes that there is a difference between leaders and nonleaders, and endeavors to render that difference observable through identifying the traits that predispose someone to emerge as a leader and achieve effective leadership outcomes (Zaccaro et al., 2018, p. 31; Northouse, 2022, p. 80). This approach first emerged as an outgrowth of the hyper-individualistic “great man” theory, and, as such, initially posited leadership as a quality possessed by people who had innate attributes (Dugan, 2017, p. 86; Northouse, 2022, p. 80). Research would expand on this concept throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and into the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, focusing attention on how situational context affects which traits are desirable and emphasizing traits as mediators of leadership behaviors rather than determinant factors (Day & Zaccaro, 2007; Dugan, 2017, p. 109). In spite of these changes, trait leadership remains almost entirely focused on the role of an individual leader in group processes with Northouse (2022) stating, “this approach emphasizes that having a leader with a certain set of traits is crucial to having effective leadership. It is the leader and the leader’s traits that are central to the leadership process” (p. 102). While this emphasis on leader-centricity runs counter to the values of critical leadership studies, it provides a useful lens through which to examine how *DAI*, or any other videogame, frames the player-character as deserving the power that is often connected with leadership.

Trait theory is an ultimately leader-centric perspective on leadership, even in its more contextual variations. Northouse (2022) identifies this as a major part of the theory’s appeal, claiming that it is “intuitively appealing. It fits clearly with our notion that leaders are the individuals who are out front and leading the way in our society” (p. 104). This intuitiveness,

however, relies on ideologies that center individualism and meritocracy, the commonsensical logic (Towers, 2018) that critical leadership studies seeks to deconstruct. Videogames that rely on the conventional assumptions underlying trait theory therefore run the risk of reinscribing this leader-centricity, even if other elements of the game seem to be in tension with that perspective.

The set of traits that we will be using to frame this discussion comes from Ralph Stogdill's 1974 survey of trait theory research. Stogdill's research was influential in advancing the turn to consider leadership traits in situational contexts rather than in an "atomistic fashion," giving it a legacy that is worth examining in the context of videogames (Stogdill & Bass, 1981, p. 81). This survey identified 10 traits that distinguish leaders from nonleaders: 1. Drive for responsibility and task completion. 2. Vigor and persistence in pursuit of goals. 3 Originality and creativity in problem-solving. 4. Drive to exercise initiative in social situations. 5. Self-confidence and sense of personal identity. 6. Willingness to accept consequences of decision and action. 7. Readiness to absorb interpersonal stress. 8. Willingness to tolerate frustration and delay. 9. Ability to influence other persons' behavior. 10. Capacity to structure social interaction systems to the purpose at hand. (Stogdill & Bass, 1981, p. 81). It is important to note, however, that one of the central criticisms of trait theory is that the determination of the most important leadership traits tends to be highly subjective (Northouse, 2022, p. 107). With this in mind, Stogdill's survey should not be taken as the definitive 10 traits that describe a leader. These traits were not chosen because they are accurate or objective, but because they are highly applicable to the leadership context of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*.

Through the game's procedural affordances and its narrative context, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* presents the Inquisitor as a leader who holds almost every one of the ten traits identified by Stogdill. Their drive for responsibility and task completion is manifested through



*DAI*'s structure as a progression game (Juul, 2005, p. 5) that requires players to be the primary agentic being motivating further action in the game system. Dialogue scenes frequently give the Inquisitor the opportunity to demonstrate their originality in problem-solving, identifying solutions that other characters could not see. This further illustrates their drive to exercise initiative in social situations as dialogue interactions are one of the central pillars of gameplay, creating social spaces in which the player is often the driver of conversations.

The recognition of these qualities on their own does not give rise to the player-leader subjectivity, but they do shape the directed freedom from which players can approach and intervene in the behaviors and values of leadership. For example, *DAI* clearly associates the player-character with Stogdill's (1981) ninth trait: "ability to influence other persons' behavior" (p. 81). This appears through a myriad of mechanics including the Approval system which measures the Inquisitor's likability in relation to each individual NPC companion (Knight & Musa, 2014, p. 7).<sup>21</sup> By engaging companions in dialogue and making choices that affect the society of Thedas, the Inquisitor's Approval rating with each character will shift up and down, affecting how these NPCs communicate with the Inquisitor and whether their relationships develop a toxic or mutually supportive dynamic. Through the Approval system and the dialogue mechanic, players have some degree of freedom in choosing the values that they want to express, either motivating their companions to commit to the Inquisition's cause or potentially driving them away. Regardless of how the Inquisitor chooses to express themselves, however, the Approval system requires players to model the "ability to influence other persons' behavior." The player-leader will always be associated with this trait, even if they do not want to be,

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<sup>21</sup> Chapter 6 will provide a more in-depth analysis of *DAI*'s Approval system and the relationships that form between players and their NPC companions.

constraining the leadership behaviors players can practice such that they constantly affirm this attribute. In other words, this trait is an irrefutable element of *DAI*'s directed freedom.

Not every trait is so predetermined. *Dragon Age: Inquisition* heavily encourages players to seek out and speak with their companions between main story quests, but players can ignore this direction, instead playing the role of a leader who refuses the “drive to exercise initiative in social situations” trait implied by this element of the game. That being said, *DAI*'s structure suggests that a good leader will exhibit this trait, and, as such, the player's choice to reject it is framed as an incorrect or less valid approach to leadership. In this way, *DAI* incentivizes and sometimes requires players to exhibit certain traits, validating these qualities as constituting desirable or “good” leadership.

Such a consideration also reveals that these traits appear in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* according to a sliding scale, not a binary opposition. While trait theory suggests that modeling most or all these ten traits will position someone as a potentially successful leader, not every trait is required for someone to be identified as a leader and individual traits can appear to varying degrees in the specific contexts where they are most applicable. The Inquisitor of *DAI* does not necessarily exhibit all ten traits in every moment. Frequent engagement in dialogue scenes with NPCs will highlight the Inquisitor's “drive to exercise initiative in social situations” while delegating tasks at the War Table underscores their capacity to “structure social interaction systems to the task at hand”.<sup>22</sup> Thus, players who consistently seek out conversations with their companions will model the Inquisitor's drive to exercise initiative in social situations to a greater degree than a player who spends more time organizing tasks at the War Table. The affordances and requirements of *DAI* incentivize players to engage both traits, but each player's individual choices can manifest one more than the other. Leadership, as noted by Ladkin (2010), is

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<sup>22</sup> The War Table is discussed at greater length in Chapter 5.

contextual. Many of Stogdill's ten traits can therefore be associated with *DAI*'s Inquisitor, but their prevalence relative to one another is variable.

This flexibility from the player is critical when considering traits that are less neatly applicable to the structure of *DAI*. The trait "vigor and persistence in pursuit of goals" may seem to dovetail with "drive for responsibility and task completion," but players can modulate this trait if they play the game in a slower-paced and leisurely way. Instead of focusing on the central tasks of the main quest, they might spend hours exploring the beautiful environments of Thedas or try to engage every optional NPC in dialogue. Furthermore, "willingness to tolerate frustration and delay" is an element that players can choose to practice or not depending on their responses in dialogue scenes. An NPC companion may make a comment that angers the Inquisitor, prompting dialogue choices that can involve vastly different emotional reactions from expressing sincere apologies to lashing out in anger. This further demonstrates that, although *DAI*'s systems privilege and encourage the consistent manifestation of these traits, their appearance is variable depending on how the player chooses to role-play as the leader of the Inquisition.<sup>23</sup> It also indicates that even the traits from Stogdill's survey that are not easily assignable to the Inquisitor can still provide useful lenses for understanding the player's engagement in leadership behaviors. The intervention of player behavior does not eliminate or establish certain traits, but modifies which ones are more apparent in the player-leader's approach. These ten traits can therefore be used as a frame to understand the directed freedom and possibility space in which the player-leader of *DAI* can act.

While Stogdill's ten traits provide a framework to understand how *DAI* presents the Inquisitor as an individual who is uniquely suited to the role of leadership, ten traits are too many

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<sup>23</sup> How players can intervene in and appropriate the embedded values of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* will be discussed in Chapter 7.

to explicate in detail. The importance of some of these traits will be reflected in the discussion of following chapters. The Inquisitor’s “drive for responsibility and task completion” and their “capacity to structure social systems to the purpose at hand” are clearly reflected in Chapter 5’s discussion of the War Table, Power, and Influence systems while their “ability to influence other persons’ behavior” is deeply connected to Chapter 6’s analysis of dialogue and companion interactions. While the following chapters will emphasize the procedural affordances that allow players to engage in leadership, the rest of this chapter will focus on how *DAI*’s narrative domain uses elements of trait theory to further contextualize the player-leader’s position.

### ***In the Frame of the Iron Bull***

One of the Inquisitor’s most prominent traits and the one with which the rest of this chapter is primarily concerned is the “willingness to accept consequences of decision and action.” *Dragon Age: Inquisition* emphasizes this trait, as well as “drive for responsibility and task completion,” through the numerous decisions that players are required to make. Players must delegate tasks to advisors at the War Table, choose how to sentence war criminals in Judgments, and make world altering decisions about the structure of society during Decision Points. The player’s responsibility for making decisions and facing their consequences is one of the traits that they have no capacity to modulate if they seek to complete *DAI*. This is made abundantly clear in the scene discussed at the beginning of the chapter where the game forces players to make a choice that affirms a leader identity. Regardless of how they play the game, players must demonstrate this decision-making quality. Critically, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* draws specific attention to the Inquisitor’s “willingness to accept consequences of decision and action” by explicitly acknowledging and naming this trait through the game’s narrative context.

Near the start of the game, players can initiate a conversation with a recruitable NPC companion named Iron Bull. After remarking on the quality of the Inquisition’s armed forces, Iron Bull states that “The problem for the Inquisition right now isn’t on the frontline. It’s at the top. You’ve got no leader. No Inquisitor” (Figure 4.3). The player is offered the opportunity to respond and can question if the Inquisition needs a leader, choose to name several companions who they think would make a good leader, or claim that they should have the opportunity to act as leader. Iron Bull dismisses the idea that the Inquisition could operate without a leader, discounts the possibilities of alternative leader options by noting that they lack certain traits, and is intrigued by the suggestion that the player-character should be the Inquisitor.



Figure 4.3 - Iron Bull identifies that the lack of a singular leader is a problem for the Inquisition (BioWare, 2014).

If the player-character suggests themselves, Iron Bull inquires further, asking what would make them a good leader. Players can justify themselves through an appeal to their position as Herald ordained by a holy entity. They can also acknowledge the same thing as Solas: they have the Mark and the capacity to seal rifts. Iron Bull dismisses both, suggesting that the Mark represents a “skill” and doesn’t mean the player-character should be making alliances. Meanwhile their status as Herald, “Gets you the believers. Doesn’t do much for the rest of us,

though” (BioWare, 2014). The only response that Iron Bull approves of is the Inquisitor’s acknowledgment that they have a responsibility to seal rifts due to their Mark, meaning that they are “here whether I like it or not” and, thus, are willing to step forward if need be (BioWare, 2014). Iron Bull doesn’t discount this response, indicating that he respects the Inquisitor’s courage and sense of responsibility. A notification that “Iron Bull slightly approves” appears on the left side of the screen, signaling that this response was, in fact, the correct one.<sup>24</sup>

It is Iron Bull’s final statement that is the most telling of the game’s perspective on leadership. Regardless of the player’s choices in the preceding dialogue, Iron Bull will always end the conversation by explaining that “My people don’t pick leaders from the strongest, or the smartest, or even the most talented. We pick the ones willing to make the hard decisions...and live with the consequences” (Figure 4.4). At first glance, this statement seems to be a rejection of the trait theory perspective of leadership, denying the conventional attributes that might be assigned to “strong” leaders. However, in truth, Iron Bull merely posits a different trait as the core element of leadership, one that is an almost verbatim echo of Stogdill’s sixth trait: “Willingness to accept consequences of decision or action” (1981, p. 81).

The conversation with Iron Bull may not call on a strong form of the player-leader subjectivity, but it contributes important context for what leadership means in *DAI*. The conversation raises questions about what kind of person should be a leader with Iron Bull validating the player-character’s uniqueness in the virtual world. Given that the game has already presented the player with decision-making authority, Iron Bull’s final statement reads as an implicit endorsement of the player-character as future leader, an endorsement that is highlighted through the identification of Iron Bull’s approval. Importantly, the trait acknowledged by Iron

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<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, Iron Bull also “slightly approves” if the player suggests that Cassandra could be a good leader. However, this approval is undermined by Bull’s follow-up comment that her lack of vision makes her unfit for the position. The only response that can receive Iron Bull’s full endorsement is in relation to the player-character.

Bull is not something that the game can evaluate with a failure condition. He does not say, “We pick the ones who make the choices that help the most people” or “We pick the ones who make the choices that preserve our culture.” What is important to Iron Bull isn’t the ethical underpinning of the Inquisitor’s decisions, but the simple fact that they make a decision as a leader and then continue to fulfill that role. Read against the game’s seemingly profound dilemma of “Lead Them or Fall,” the only way for players to actually “Fall” in this regard is for them to not make a choice, and the only way for players to not make a choice in *DAI* is for them to stop playing the game. Consequently, by virtue of playing the game, players will unavoidably model the leadership trait of which Iron Bull most approves.

In this light, Iron Bull’s comments are not hypothetical considerations about the qualities an Inquisitor should possess, but an exaltation of the traits that the player-character has already demonstrated. The introverted Leliana is unsuited to be Inquisitor because she won’t be “standing in the spotlight anytime soon” while Cassandra “doesn’t see the big picture” (BioWare, 2014). These statements that identify the deficiencies of NPCs as leaders simultaneously imply that the player-character possesses what these characters lack. Iron Bull’s statements therefore serve to further mark the player-character as a world-savior character uniquely suited to wielding authority.



Figure 4.4 - Iron Bull advocates for decision-making as a core leadership trait (BioWare, 2014).

There are several other conversations in *DAI* that involve topics tangential to leadership. Vivienne can inquire into how the player-character will use their newly acquired influence, Josephine will discuss her preference for diplomatic solutions to problems, and Cassandra herself will suggest that she does not have the temperament to lead such a large organization. However, this conversation with Iron Bull is one of the only times that the game explicitly addresses the concept of leadership and articulates arguments about what makes someone a leader. In this way, Iron Bull is allowed to make *Dragon Age: Inquisition's* most normative and direct statement about leadership. The possibility of proceeding with no hierarchical leader is rejected outright, dismissing collective forms of leadership. His responses to the suggested NPC companions and his ultimate conclusion reveal a belief that a leader's traits are the most critical aspect of leadership. Finally, his approval of the player-character's desire for the leader role reinforces Jennings's (2022) assertion that videogames treat decision-making authority as a natural extension of the player-character's world-savior status (p. 330). Most importantly, Iron Bull's perspective is validated by *Dragon Age: Inquisition's* procedural affordances for leadership.



Sera is also a character who will engage the player-character in a discussion of what leadership is and could be. She acts as a primary figure within a network of contacts called the “Friends of Red Jenny” that work together as a dispersed and egalitarian Robin Hood-esque group to support marginalized folk and strike back against the rich. In her descriptions, she will never claim herself to be a “leader.” The Inquisitor can even press her on this, stating that “someone must be in charge” of the network. Sera responds by saying “There’s nothing to lead,” and explains that “It’s not mine, right? I mean, it is, but it’s also everyone [working together]” (Figure 4.5). In contrast to Iron Bull, Sera’s discussion of her network does center leadership as a process, emphasizing how the group cooperates and what the network values rather than focusing on the individual qualities that are presumed to make it successful. *Dragon Age: Inquisition* therefore does use the voices of its NPCs to present contrasting possibilities of leadership.



Figure 4.5 - Sera refuses the leader identity (BioWare, 2014).

Unfortunately, *DAI* never makes these alternate possibilities available to the player through its gameplay systems. As stated, Sera refuses any association with the concept of leadership or authority, something that the player cannot do. They cannot engage in a dispersed

leadership structure. The Inquisition will always contain a hierarchy with the Inquisitor at the top and their companions below them. The Inquisitor can, in dialogue, suggest that they are only able to be successful because of the support from the companions whom they view as equals, however, the procedural affordances of the game do not reinforce this perspective. Every important decision comes down to the Inquisitor's choice and the Inquisitor is the primary agent by which the Inquisition accomplishes its goals. The player-character must be present for every mission of the game, forcing the Inquisitor to be someone who has a "drive for responsibility and task completion" (Stogdill & Bass, 1981, p. 81) by the simple fact of their constant presence. The player cannot allow Cassandra to delegate tasks at the War Table, or let Blackwall choose the weapons he wants to equip. As Jennings (2022) states in relation to the underlying capitalist logics of *Horizon Zero Dawn*, "Aloy can only save the world – and players can only finish the game – by participating in an unconstrained extraction of resources" (p. 334). In a similar way, the directed freedom of *DAI*'s gameplay systems constrain the player-leader in such a way that they must manifest the neoliberal leader-centric behaviors associated with trait theory, taking initiative in social situations, assuming responsibility for task completion, and learning to live with the consequences of the decisions they are required make.

### ***Conclusion***

The logics of trait theory underlie *Dragon Age: Inquisition*'s attempts to contextualize leadership and this has consequences for how the player-leader emerges in this game. NPCs talk about the qualities that make someone a leader more than they discuss the processes they engage with, gameplay systems emphasize the agency of the player-character to the detriment of other virtual entities, and the Inquisitor is literally marked with a special ability that gives them messianic power. While the narrative domain does acknowledge the notion that leadership is a

process and that the “leader” identity is coconstructed by a community, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* ultimately assigns leadership behaviors to the player-character as de facto authority, thus associating leadership with heroic pursuits engaged by those who have special traits and an exclusive access to agency.

Even at the start of the game, when the player-character is as far away as they can be from being in a position of leadership, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* insists on investing players with the authority to lead. This is not because of something they did, a value they have demonstrated, or even a trait they possess. It is purely because, as the player-character, they have been marked as special. This combination of procedural affordances and narrative context frame *Dragon Age: Inquisition*'s player-character as a romanticized hero-leader/world-savior who is the central motivator for organizational and societal change, contributing to a view of leadership that sees it as the purview of entities who are unique and specially marked off from the rest of the population.

*Dragon Age: Inquisition* presents numerous elements that contain judgments about the nature of leadership. These elements inform the player's understanding about what it means to perform leadership in *DAI* by providing context that consistently validates a leader-centric approach to the concept. Consequently, the Inquisitor of *DAI* is linked to the image of a hero-leader, shaping the player's engagement in leadership behaviors such that those behaviors will consistently reflect the individualistic values of neoliberalism. From this analysis of the hero-leader at the center of *DAI*, we can move into a discussion of how the player's in-game affordances for engaging in the process of leadership support or conflict with these values.

## Chapter 5 - The Inquisition

The Inquisition itself begins as an organization cobbled together from various loosely allied factions and groups. Representatives from a diverse range of nations and walks of life bring with them soldiers, spies, diplomats, smithies, merchants, scholars, alchemists, and all manner of people to fight back against the Breach. Despite this disorganization, the Inquisition quickly becomes a wide-ranging organization with a variety of functions that seeks to restore order and peace to Thedas, spurred primarily by the actions of the heroic player-character. At this early stage, however, it is still a fragile organization with very few practical alliances. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Herald of Andraste assumes de facto status as representative of the Inquisition with their first goal being the establishment of new alliances, building a good reputation, and gaining enough power to fight back against the Breach. These pursuits are tracked by two game systems: Power and Influence.

These metrics can be altered through numerous in-game actions, present players with distinct rewards, and affect the play experience of *DAI* to varying degrees. Importantly, the systems carry names that invoke common themes of leadership, providing important context to the player-leader. We have already spent much time identifying leadership as an influence process, one that often involves the wielding of power while also requiring the negotiation of approval from entities who willingly grant the leader-identity and engage in followership practices.<sup>25</sup> As such, these systems are core to *DAI*'s constructed image of leadership and the emergence of the player-leader subjectivity. Indeed, the very naming of two game mechanics as “Power” and “Influence” may position players to feel that their interaction with these systems connote a process of leadership.

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<sup>25</sup> A third system called “Approval” is also a critical element of the player-leader subjectivity and will be discussed in Chapter 6.

## ***Power and Influence***

The Power system in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* is positioned not as the “productive network” theorized by Michel Foucault (2001, p. 120) but as a resource. Players earn points of Power as they explore the open-world environments of Thedas, completing quests, filling Requisitions for Inquisition supplies, claiming camps in the wilderness, or recruiting agents to their cause (Figure 5.1). Power is thus accumulated when players pursue goals that strengthen the Inquisition; in the words of the NPC Cullen, that establish the organization as a “stabilizing force” in the world of Thedas (BioWare, 2014). This construction frames “power” primarily in the sense of military might or physical presence rather than as a diffused network of influence.

Players use the resource of power for two primary purposes: to unlock new regions of the world to explore and to initiate main story missions. As players progress through the game’s main quest, they unlock scouting missions that can be initiated at the War Table and require set amounts of Power to complete. These operations open new environments from desert wastes to lush forests to snow-capped mountains which contain opportunities for players to recover that expended resource through the gameplay actions mentioned above. Players are not required to visit every region in the game to complete the main quest, but they are incentivized to widen the Inquisition’s influence in these various regions through the promise of engaging side quests, beautiful environments to explore, and intriguing gameplay elements to discover.

*Dragon Age: Inquisition* makes Power an essential resource through one design: it is required to initiate main story missions. While players can explore unlocked regions and complete side quests without any restrictions, every main story mission requires players to return to the War Table at their headquarters and spend increasingly large amounts of Power as the

game progresses.<sup>26</sup> Through this, the Power system in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* acts as a restrictive or regulatory force that pushes players to engage a consistent gameplay loop: power is spent to progress through a main story mission, then players must venture back into the wilds of Thedas to complete quests and accumulate Power so that they can use the resource to progress the next main story quest. Through this loop, Power regulates the player's progression through the game with its primary application not being used to influence followers but to ensure continual progression.



Figure 5.1 - DAI's initial description of both Power and Influence (BioWare, 2014).

The Influence system shares some qualities with Power, but also diverges in several ways. Influence is accumulated in much the same way as Power through completing quests and various actions in the explorable environments with main story missions giving larger boosts of Influence. However, Influence can also be gained through War Table operations which often provide minor to moderate boosts as a reward for delegating tasks to certain advisors. Rather than Power's emphasis on military might, Influence can be viewed as the Inquisition's reputation

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<sup>26</sup> The early-game main quest "Address the Chantry" requires the use of 4 Power while the quest "Wicked Eyes, Wicked Hearts," which takes place much later in the game, necessitates 30 Power.

throughout Thedas. As the Inquisitor completes quests and becomes known as a heroic figure, word spreads that the Inquisition itself is providing a service to the world.

Unlike Power, Influence does not exist as a resource to be accumulated and spent. Instead, Influence's most direct corollary is the conventional RPG experience system. As players gain Influence points, their Inquisition Rank will steadily rise. When this increases to the next rank, players gain a specific skill point that can be used at the War Table to unlock an "Inquisition Perk" (Figure 5.3). These perks fall under four categories, Forces, Secrets, Connections, and Inquisition. They can range from granting an additional 5% boost of experience points when defeating enemies in combat to several options that unlock hidden dialogue options to receiving discounts at merchant locations. Therefore, unlike Power which functions as a resource to be spent and then recovered, Influence works in a much more linear manner, representing the continuous growth of the Inquisition.

These systems serve a central purpose: they consistently communicate to the player that the Inquisition is larger than the player-character. Power does not reflect the player-character's strength, nor does Influence identify the Inquisitor's renown. Both are reflections of the Inquisition's status, allowing players to understand that they are responsible for the growth and development of an organization that extends beyond themselves and includes followers beyond their core companions. Power and Influence contextualize the Inquisition as a whole as the player-leader's followers, even the parts that might not be recognized by the procedural domain.

These elements that are invisible to the procedural domain do appear as context in the narrative domain, contributing to the player's impression of the Inquisition's large size. Players can find letters throughout their headquarters where members of the Inquisition identify the struggle of masons to repair the foundations of a stronghold or the difficulties of cooks to prepare

tasty meals. Diplomats in the Inquisition stronghold's great hall discuss the events of the main narrative, expressing frustration or agreement with the Inquisitor's decisions. Different factions of NPCs will be more visible in the home base depending on the alliances the player builds (Figure 5.2). Even though the player-leader does not have any affordances for speaking with these characters or contributing to the tasks of the masons and cooks, these representations present the Inquisition as an organization that exists beyond the player-character, responding to their choices and necessitating an infrastructure of cooks, servants, guards, and merchants in order to function. Such aspects are less visible than some procedural elements, but these characters are all still followers for which the player-leader, as head of the organization, holds some responsibility. That being said, the systems of Power and Influence both contain several issues, the most significant being their emphasis on the Inquisitor's individualism.



Figure 5.2 - Background NPCs in the Inquisition stronghold reflect the player's decisions. Here, a mage, Grey Warden, and Orlesian knight are in conversation, reflecting the player's choice to ally with the Mages and recruit the Grey Wardens (BioWare, 2014).

### ***All for One***

The systems of Power and Influence are abstract, but tangible representations of the Inquisition's development, however, this growth is achieved primarily through the player-



character's individual actions. The vast majority of both Influence and Power is accumulated through the player's exploration of and engagement with the virtual environments and their entities. This effectively "responsibilizes" the player (Baerg, 2012, p. 169) for the whole of the Inquisition. While this sense of responsibility is one of the central elements of the player-leader subjectivity, the fact that the player-character bears sole responsibility for increasing Power and Influence invokes neoliberal values of individualism (Baerg, 2012) and reifies the notion that individual leaders are the primary motivators of organizational growth and change.

This is further complicated by the fact that the Inquisitor maintains sole discretion over the use of Power. Even before they have been given the official title of Inquisitor, members of the Inquisitor's inner council entirely defer to the player-leader's decisions about how to accumulate and spend Power. It is not surprising that *Dragon Age: Inquisition* places this capacity solely within the player's hands. It is, after all, a game designed to make the player feel like a leader, and giving players the discretion to direct the power of a large organization certainly fits with conventional perspectives of authority as identified in the previous discussion around trait theory. This ensures that players will feel a sense of agency over how they direct the organization. Yet, much like how the need for drama in cinematic depictions of leadership incline that medium towards representations of leader-centricity, this reification of the player-leader comes at the expense of the agency of other virtual entities. By representing leadership primarily as a top-down hierarchical process, players are, ultimately, unable to defer their Power to other beings. Thus, while Power may not represent a specific quality of the Inquisitor, the fact that this resource is accessible to only one individual leader represents the concept of power as something that isn't part of a productive social network comprised of mutually influencing beings, but is a trait held by entities and one that should be directed by a single individual.

Influence contains a similar leader-centric value. Many of the Inquisition Perks, while ostensibly benefiting the Inquisition as a whole, tend to emphasize the Inquisitor's individual capabilities. The aforementioned "knowledge" perks that open hidden dialogue provide the player with more options for exerting their own agency, but only allow other NPCs to respond to the player-character's speech, not initiate new dialogue forms on their own terms (Figure 5.3). The "Inquisition" branch of these perks should maybe have been renamed to "Inquisitor" given that every option except for one benefits the player-character's abilities alone. As a result, the growth of the organization as viewed through the Influence system occurs primarily to enhance the capabilities of a singular individual, romanticizing the heroic-leader as both the generator of increased influence and its primary beneficiary.

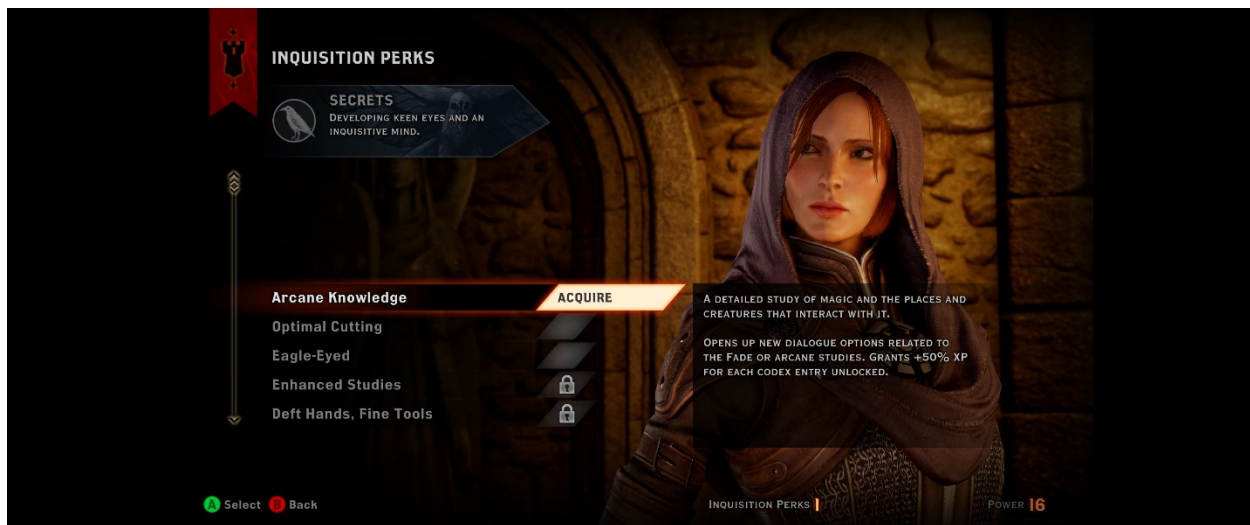


Figure 5.3 - Inquisition Perks that are made available through the Influence Systems (BioWare, 2014).

This is a limitation of both the Influence and Power systems as well as *Dragon Age: Inquisition's* place in the role-playing genre. Since the game contains a protagonist around which much of the narrative is centered, these quantifiable representations of the Inquisition's growth aren't able to produce much effect in the game system beyond the Inquisitor. In strategy games such as *Civilization*, the game's many statistics do not reference a single individual, but an

organization or society as a whole. Choosing to upgrade different technological resources in *Civilization VI* changes a society's ability to defend itself from invaders and create new infrastructure, potentially influencing the contentment of a city's population (Firaxis Games, 2016; *Amenities*, n.d.).<sup>27</sup> Because *Civilization* is interested in entire groups rather than individuals, it can more directly model how choices have knock-on effects for communities while the procedural resource systems of *DAI* are more focused on individuals.<sup>28</sup>

Another essential element is the fact that the effects of Power and Influence can both only be applied through the War Table in the Inquisition stronghold. Players must approach the War Table to find the menu to select their Inquisition Perk while unlocking new regions and initiating main story missions are presented as operations on the War Table map. This further contextualizes the concepts of Power and Influence in the frame of militaristic and hierarchical values common to role-playing games (Trammell, 2018), linking the practice of leadership in these contexts to Jennings's (2022, p. 330) authoritarian agency by conceptualizing the leader's influence primarily in relation to combat and military action.

The Inquisition does grow and this growth allows the player-leader to emerge through the sensation that they are responsible for the development of an organization that is capable of great social change. Importantly, however, there is no way for the Inquisition to lose Power or Influence, meaning that the player-leader cannot fail to generate this growth. The Inquisition can only grow more powerful, and that organizational power can only benefit the player-character. Even a "bad" leader who neglects their followers or who uses resources irresponsibly will still inevitably develop the Inquisition into a powerful and influential organization. There is no in-

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<sup>27</sup> Such a consideration indicates that a cross-genre analysis of leadership in games would prove supremely valuable in progressing this research.

<sup>28</sup> Players do have the opportunity to exert this type of procedural influence in *DAI*, but it is localized to the Approval of their companions as individuals. This system will be discussed in the following chapter.

game choice that would irreparably damage an alliance or restrict the player's ability to progress the game's narrative. Thus, the only failure state that Power and Influence can produce in *DAI* is the potentially prolonged timeline required for the Inquisition's growth to manifest. As a result, the metrics of Power and Influence do not provide any feedback on whether the player is acting as a "good" or "bad" leader. They merely serve as evidence that the player is furthering progress toward the game's end goals, implying that it does not matter how the player leads so long as they continue to make progress. Seen through the light of the "Lead Them or Fall" marketing tagline, it is impossible for Power or Influence to cause the player to "Fall." These systems only allow the possibility for the player to continually develop their organization's strength. This leader-centric representation of Power and Influence as unidirectional systems that are directed by one agentic being thus facilitate the assumption of a neoliberal leader identity that is focused on growth and expansion, linking these colonialist logics with the player-leader of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*.

These systems did not have to reflect these values, however, and there are brief exceptions in the game that demonstrate how Power and Influence might have been used differently to communicate alternative leadership dynamics. Although players primarily use the resource of power to unlock new regions of the world to explore and activate main story missions, there are also War Table operations that require the use of Power to complete. These few examples come closer to representing the concept as a form of influence that produces effects within a network, approaching conceptions of power from Foucault as well as leadership studies as a whole. The most prominent of these involves the companion Blackwall.

Close to the end of the game, the NPC companion Blackwall reveals himself to be a former criminal mercenary named Thom Rainier who stole the identity of the Grey Warden

Blackwall to avoid punishment for his crimes as well as to atone for them. After doing so, he is imprisoned and sentenced to death, but the Inquisitor can spend one point of Power to have Blackwall released and returned to the Inquisition (Figure 5.4; BioWare, 2014, “Thom Rainier’s Fate”). In this instance, power is exercised not as a form of military might but diplomatic influence, and this indicates a hypothetical alternative to Power as it is currently instantiated in the game. Rather than being used primarily to unlock more aspects of the game, Power might have been used more commonly across operations, shaping Power into a resource that can manifest the Inquisition’s social and political influence rather than solely its military strength.

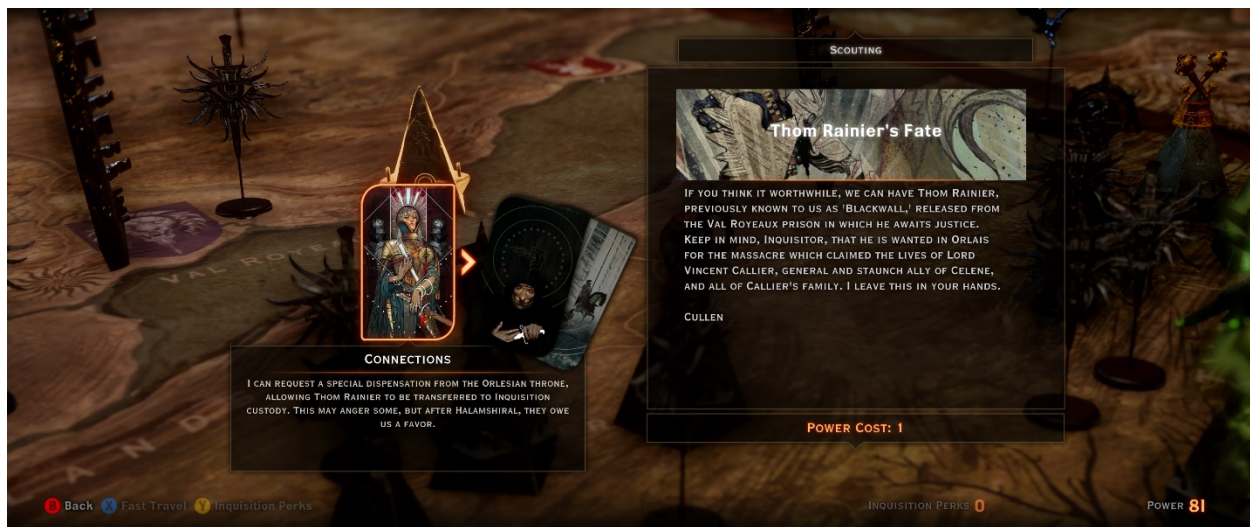


Figure 5.4 - One of the only Operations that requires players to spend Power aside from unlocking environments and initiating main story missions (BioWare, 2014, “Thom Rainier’s Fate”).

Power and Influence both provide information that contextualizes the player-character as the primary decision-maker at the head of an organization of followers, allowing players to progress through the game and select special abilities to tailor their gameplay experience to their liking. Through this process, these systems work to subjectivize players into assuming the responsibility of the player-leader subjectivity. Nonetheless, they fail to address the other elements of the player-leader heuristic. For example, although Power and Influence can both be accumulated through engagement with followers and making decisions that express values, they

cannot be applied in a similarly processual or relational manner. It is up to the Inquisitor and only the Inquisitor to decide which regions to unlock, what Inquisition Perks to select, and when to progress the main story. Furthermore, the player is very rarely able to use either of these systems to engage in the expression of values. Unlike War Table operations, in which advisors present the potential moral concerns of every mission, there are no ethical values associated with unlocking new regions or selecting Inquisition Perks. They simply represent the next phases of progression that the player can choose to pursue. As such, *Dragon Age: Inquisition*'s systems of Power and Influence heavily implicate the responsibility, agency, and capacity to effect change that are conventionally understood components of leader identities; they can give rise to the player-leader subjectivity. At the same time, and despite the connotations of the systems' names, they do not necessarily provide the player-leader with many opportunities to practically enact the process of leadership by engaging followers or expressing values. This inclines the systems to implicate neoliberal values of individualism and conventional command-and-control depictions of leadership. One mechanic which does present leadership behaviors as a process, however, is the War Table.

### ***The War Table***

After completing the game's prologue and stalling the onset of the Breach, the Inquisition is called into being and the player is presented with numerous procedural affordances and dialogue scenes that allow them to immediately begin assuming the player-leader subjectivity. The most important of these affordances is the War Table. Here the future Inquisitor gathers with a council of three advisors to address the numerous tasks throughout Thedas that require their attention. The council includes Leliana, a former advisor to the recently deceased Divine who acts as the Inquisition's Spymaster; Cullen, a former templar who turned from the

order when war erupted against the mages and now serves as Commander of the Inquisition's army; and Josephine, an old friend of Leliana's, called in to act as the chief Diplomat for the new organization. This council thus represents the different facets of the Inquisition: secret spies, military forces, and diplomatic connections. Each member has a distinct voice and worldview that they express through the advice they give on how to approach the myriad problems facing Thedas as viewed through the War table.

The War Table is a map of Thedas that becomes populated by numerous "operations" the player-character can delegate as tasks for the council members to pursue and complete independent of the player's input (Figure 5.5). As described by the official *Dragon Age: Inquisition* strategy guide, the War Table "allows [the player] to apply the power of the Inquisition throughout Orlais and Ferelden" (Knight & Musa, 2014, p. 118). These operations can involve responding to a nobleman's plea for help, locating mystical artifacts in the wastes of a desert, or completing a diplomatic mission to a foreign nation (BioWare, 2014).



Figure 5.5 - The War Table depicts Operations that players can pursue across the map of Thedas (BioWare, 2014).

From the War Table, players are presented with an overview of the operation's central dilemma. Each advisor presents a description of how they would go about resolving the issue and

the Inquisitor then chooses who to delegate the completion of the task to. Different advisors will provide distinct rewards for the completion of most operations. Operations are completed according to a timer that counts down in real-world time and there are many instances where one specific advisor will take less time to finish the task than the others. For example, an operation that involves a military task might take Josephine 60 minutes to complete while Cullen, given his proclivity for that type of activity, would finish the same mission in 48 minutes. As a result, assessing and delegating operations from the War Table requires players to engage ethical reasoning, time management, and an ability to predict potential future outcomes based on the advisors' suggestions.

The operation "Address a Nobleman's Concerns" provides a useful example from early in the game. In this operation, the Inquisition is approached by a nobleman, Lord Kildarn, who is frustrated by the presence of refugees occupying space in his territory (Figure 5.6). With no assistance from the country's monarch and few soldiers of his own to oust these refugees, the nobleman requests the Inquisition's aid. This example illustrates how War Table operations often contain ethical dimensions, especially due to the nobleman's insistence that there are "elves and [rebel mages]" amongst the refugees (BioWare, 2014, "Address a Nobleman's Concerns"). Depending on the player's perspective on the mage rebellion and racial tensions in the world of Thedas, the nobleman's request might be read with more favor directed toward the refugees rather than the noble himself or vice versa.



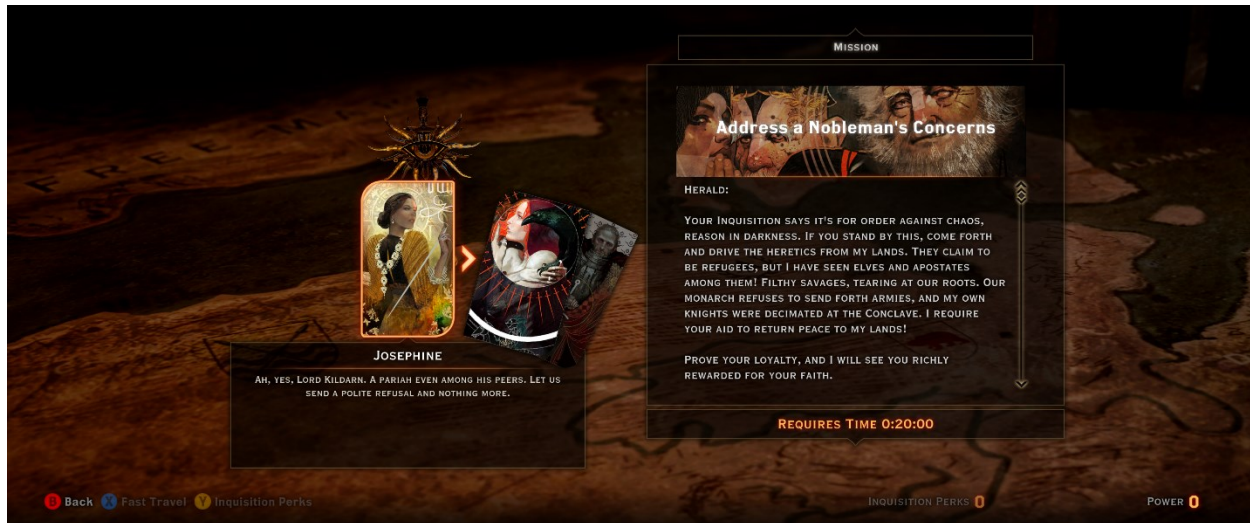


Figure 5.6 - Lord Kildarn's request along with Josephine's suggestion to politely refuse (BioWare, 2014, "Address a Nobleman's Concerns").

The advisors address this ethical dimension by suggesting resolutions to the situation that reflect their own worldviews. Josephine notes that she's aware of Kildarn's less-than-stellar reputation and suggests a simple, but polite refusal. Leliana offers to "take advantage of [Kildarn's] raving" and have her spies harass the refugees into relocating. Cullen, on the other hand, makes his ethical stance plain, advocating that Inquisition soldiers move into Kildarn's territory but support the efforts of the refugees rather than the nobleman. Deciding who leads this resolution changes the result of the mission. Josephine's blunt refusal yields no reward (Figure 5.7) while Leliana's "[taking] advantage" returns a large sum of gold and Cullen's brazen attempt to aid the refugees increases the Inquisition's Influence. Given that the nobleman is never heard from again, these rewards function as the central procedural consequences of the player-leader's choice with the game also identifying consequences in the narrative domain through the advisor's report on how the situation was resolved.



Figure 5.7 - Josephine's refusal leads to a quick summary and the acquisition of no rewards (BioWare, 2014, "Address a Nobleman's Concerns").

The completion of this operation is completely optional and provides only the most basic rewards. It does however indicate how delegating tasks from the War Table can implicate the player-leader subjectivity. Through this mechanic, players are made responsible for deciding how to influence the wider political and social structures of Thedas and also have a degree of flexibility in expressing values. These choices result in consequences in both the procedural and narrative domains and, even though these consequences may not change the future options players have for leading, they do contextualize the player's leadership as meaningful to the virtual world, resulting in the assumption of the player-leader subjectivity. As a result, the War Table functions as a central pillar around which the player is made aware that their decisions can have far-reaching consequences. Through the War Table, the Inquisition is clearly presented as an organization that exists beyond the player-character, both through the many missions that would otherwise be impossible to complete if the Inquisitor were working alone (Jackson, 2018) as well as through the process of interpreting and interacting with the Inquisitor's advisors. The decisions the player makes at the War Table are important for allowing the player-leader subjectivity to emerge, but it is the War Table and its representation of the Inquisition's size,

impacts, and steadily growing might that convince the player they are responsible for an organization composed of their followers and not simply progressing through their individual narrative.

The player's choices at the War Table contain additional dimensions that influence the values of the player-leader subjectivity. As mentioned, most operations involve one advisor's suggestion being significantly more efficient in terms of real-world completion time, suggesting that advisor has the most appropriate or most "correct" plan for resolving the dilemma (Knight & Musa, 2014, p. 118). This is important because the War Table is situated within a broader context of in-game actions that define *DAI*'s primary gameplay loop: players explore the open-world environments of Thedas to complete quests, then return to the Inquisition's stronghold where they will speak with their companions, manage their party's equipment and inventory, and access the War Table to pursue operations and apply Power and Influence. Given that players must incorporate the real-world completion times of operations into these actions, having operations resolve quickly ensures they can complete more operations and collect more rewards. This incentivizes players to practice a neoliberal logic of efficiency where selecting advisors based primarily on completion time naturalizes the assumption that players are choosing the person best suited for its completion. This aligns the War Table with leadership perspectives that privilege production and organizational outcomes over ethical or relational concerns (Dugan, 2017, p. 117). While such logics dominate much of the War Table's presentation, this presumes that efficiency is the primary value of the player-leader, something that certain operations do not always support.

Some War Table operations operate as part of a wider quest-chain where players must delegate tasks to specific advisors to access the next link in the chain. One such example appears

late in the game and involves the Grey Wardens, an order of knights sworn to fight the evil entities known as Darkspawn. This quest-chain potentially contains five operations with the final one involving the Grey Wardens working together with the Inquisition to destroy an outbreak of Darkspawn. However, depending on how players interact with the previous operations, they may not be able to complete this final quest (Figure 5.8). According to the *Dragon Age: Inquisition* wiki,

Your decisions, as you progress through this set of five war table operations, will affect the number of Grey Wardens at your disposal. Results text after every operation in the series will change to reflect your deployment decisions to that point, and the status of the Grey Wardens forces, which is what determines how many of these operations you will be able to complete” (*Defeat Marquise Bouffon*, n.d.).

Importantly, selecting the advisor who represents the most efficient completion time will not always be the choice that preserves the greatest number of Grey Wardens. In this quest-chain, therefore, players must consider the broader context of the military operation. It is important to note that the values of this quest-chain remain couched in military logics related to conserving forces and managing resources effectively, but it also reveals that efficiency is not always the central value of War Table Operations, even though it is one of the only pieces of concrete information that the game provides players regarding an operation’s outcome.

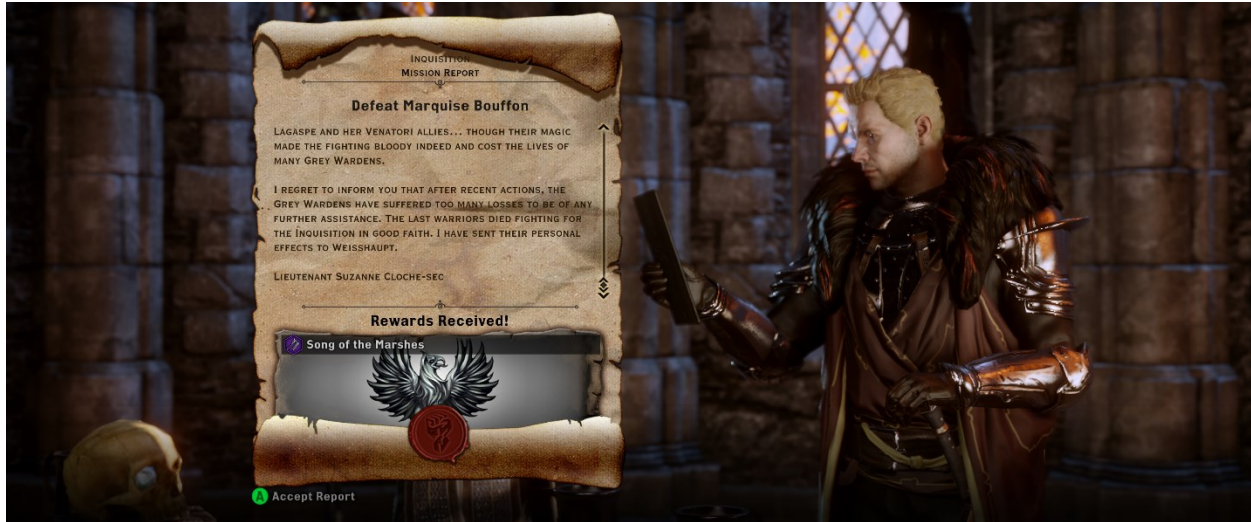


Figure 5.8 - Following completion of the fourth Operation in the quest-chain, the Grey Wardens did not have the resources to continue, making it impossible to access the final Operation in this chain (BioWare, 2014, "Defeat Marquise Bouffon").

Operations like this indicate that the narrative consequences of War Table operations have influence on the procedural domain, emphasizing the player's considerations of the values expressed by each advisor even more. The "right" choice of an operation is not always the one that completes the operation fastest, nor is it necessarily the one that grants the player the most significant reward.<sup>29</sup> The "right" choices in this leadership process are not always self-evident, requiring players to assume the player-leader subjectivity by considering the context in which they are involved, the values they are expressing, and the possible outcomes for which they will be responsible.

The War Table also comes into play in the narrative domain at the end of the game. Following completion of the main quest, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* presents players with an epilogue featuring a slide show and narration that depicts the results of the player's choices throughout the game, addressing the fallout from each major Decision Point as well as some additional details. One of these details provides a reference to how the Inquisition will continue

<sup>29</sup> The rewards from War Table operations are certainly compelling incentives. However, the player cannot predict which advisors will return with the most impactful rewards, making a consideration of such factors difficult for the player-leader in comparison to the accuracy of the projected completion time.

to function in the coming years. This description can vary between three options and is determined by which side of the Inquisition players elected to lead the most War Table Operations. If players choose to mostly rely on Cullen and the Inquisition's Forces, the narrator will state: "[The Inquisition's] military might has grown, now rivaling that of kingdoms. Fear of the Inquisition's army has become the true source of its power" (Figure 5.9). Emphasizing Leliana's focus on Secrets and subterfuge, however, leads the narrator to comment that "[The Inquisition] has eyes and ears in every hall. No secrets are beyond its reach, and that knowledge has become the source of its power" (*Epilogue (Inquisition)*, n.d.). In contrast, choosing Josephine's emphasis on diplomacy for a majority of operations will result in the following description: "[The Inquisition's] web of influence is felt in every hall. Through diplomacy and the trading of favors, it has gathered the power to shake kingdoms" (*Epilogue (Inquisition)*, n.d.). The player-leader's choices through the War Table therefore characterize the Inquisition's values as an organization. Unfortunately, this characterization does not seem to be present before this epilogue. Delegating a majority of operations to one advisor does not change how NPCs in crowds will talk about the Inquisition, nor does it have ramifications on the procedural domain. Such representations might have allowed the War Table to further emphasize the player-leader subjectivity, however, this epilogue still contextualizes how the player-leader is responsible for making choices at the War Table that express ethical values and influence how the Inquisition is viewed throughout Thedas.

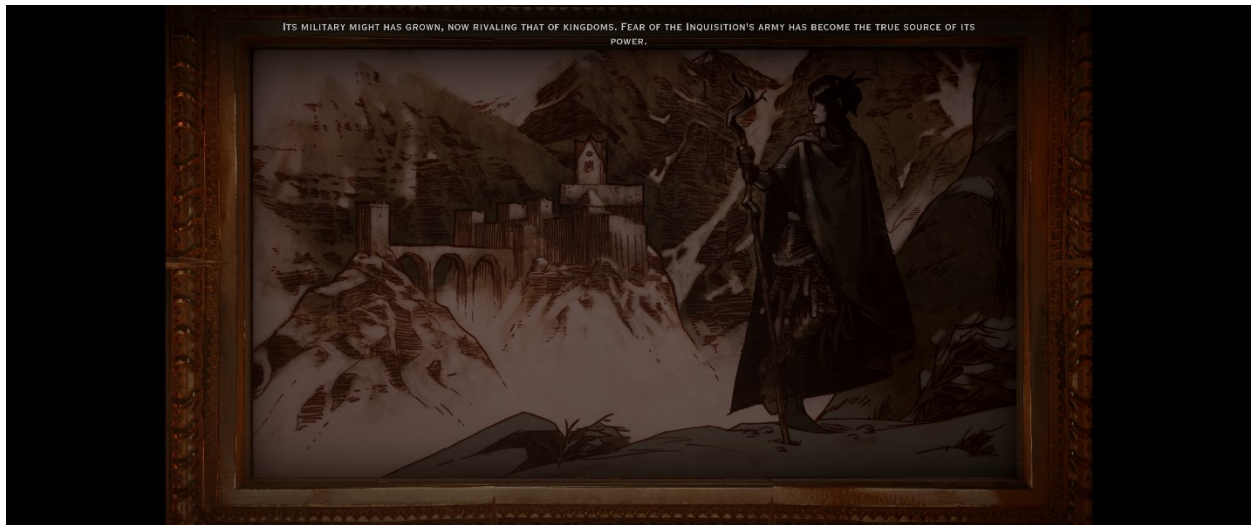


Figure 5.9 - The epilogue of DAI characterizes the Inquisition as an organization that relies on military strength (BioWare, 2014, "Epilogue").

### **Conclusion**

The War Table is one of the central mechanisms by which *Dragon Age: Inquisition* subjectivizes players into assuming the player-leader subjectivity. It is a core part of *DAI*'s gameplay loop and exerts significant influence on how players perceive the Inquisition as a vast and complex organization. The War Table itself, and the overarching systems of Power and Influence, do not fit into any of the leadership models researched for this project. Instead, they reflect a conventionally simplistic view of leadership that presents it as an authority wielded by a singular actor who is capable of influencing other entities. The three advisors present at the War Table do have the capacity to influence the player through their arguments about how to approach operations, but there is always a clear hierarchy dividing the Inquisitor from their councilors. Especially given the military context of the War Table, this expresses a value of neoliberal rationality and hierarchy that leads to a leader-centric depiction of the decision-making and influence processes of leadership. That being said, War Table operations do afford players the opportunity to engage in leadership processes much more directly than the Power and Influence systems. Players do need to express values and consider consequences when

delegating tasks at the War Table, implicating their responsibility to other virtual beings as the player-leader much clearer than the linear accumulation and application of Power and Influence.

Ultimately, all three of these elements rely on conventional leader-centric understandings of collective processes. They conform to neoliberal rationality's tendency to invest authority in people holding hierarchical positions and they privilege the values of individualism, efficiency, and power. In this sense, they primarily serve as extensions of the player-character's power. This is a power that world-savior games and their neoliberal logics reify through the procedural structure whereby individuals accumulate more and more power while their authority to influence the virtual world goes unquestioned (Jong, 2013; Jennings, 2022). A more nuanced understanding of leadership as a relational social process between agentic beings is located within the game's dialogue mechanic and approval system.



## Chapter 6 – Dialogue and Approval

While the systems of Power and Influence and the construct of the War Table provide players with an abstract understanding of the community they are responsible for leading, *Dragon Age: Inquisition*'s dialogue mechanic presents a more personal procedural representation for interacting with and influencing followers. Dialogue is a central element of any form of leadership with Northouse stating that “communication is the vehicle through which leaders and followers create, nurture, and sustain useful exchanges” (2022, p. 319). Communication through dialogue contributes to the sensemaking process of leadership where leaders and followers negotiate interpretations of environments, events and experiences to assign meaning to them (Dugan, 2017, p. 289; Weick, 1995). *Dragon Age: Inquisition* models these processes through dialogue scenes: narrative-driven sequences in which players engage NPC characters in conversations, communicating with them by selecting optional responses from a “dialogue wheel.” These responses are summarized by short lines that indicate the tone and core idea of a response with the Inquisitor voicing a more detailed line of dialogue once an option has been selected.<sup>30</sup> Through these sequences, players can role-play their interpretation of the Inquisitor, expressing the values of the character through speech. The various situations in which players can make decisions and speak with their companions through the dialogue mechanic thus implicate a relational leadership dynamic that is emphasized by the game's Approval system and which will be further contextualized using the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) model of leadership.

### ***Dialogue, Decision Points, and Judgments***

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<sup>30</sup> A similar system has been present in previous BioWare games like *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age II*.

One of the most common forms of interaction in the game, dialogue scenes can occur at virtually any point. The climaxes of quests often conclude with a dialogue exchange in which the Inquisitor discusses the quest's events with a concerned party. Exploring Thedas entails speaking with less-notable NPCs to gain information and complete quests. Interacting with members of the Inquisition's Inner Circle<sup>31</sup> can result in simple conversations where players inquire into a character's backstory or, if certain conditions in the relationship are met, trigger emotional outpourings where a companion confesses to a past mistake or even argues with the Inquisitor's leadership methods. Through dialogue, the player-character can end a debate by convincing a group to pursue a certain course of action as well as mediate conflict between two team members. Dialogue is thus the central process by which players of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* can exert influence on as well as be influenced by other entities within the game system. These scenes also afford players flexibility in choosing how to express their values and make significant decisions. This choice structure is most apparent through two common situations that employ the dialogue wheel to demonstrate the Inquisitor's influence and heavily implicate the player-leader subjectivity: Decision Points and Judgments.

Decision Points in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* are the moments in which the player-character holds the most responsibility for directing the future of the Inquisition and Thedas at large. These situations occur at the end of each main quest and present the player with choices that can invoke complex ethical questions (Knight & Musa, 2014, p. 17). For example, the quest "Wicked Eyes, Wicked Hearts" involves the Inquisitor attending a grand ball that is doubling as a royal peace summit. A story that leans on tropes of palace intrigue, players progress through the quest by speaking with dignitaries and exploring the hidden passages of the castle to gather

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<sup>31</sup> The "Inner Circle" refers to the nine recruitable NPC party members the player can recruit as well as the three War Table advisors.

information on the numerous plots through which royal rivals are vying for control of the throne. At the end of the quest, players can discuss the information they gathered with these rivals, ultimately choosing whether to support the duplicitous Ambassador Briala, authoritarian Duke Gaspard, current Empress Celene, or to advocate for a compromise that centers collaboration between the three parties (Figure 6.1). This Decision Point presents players with the authority to influence the future monarch of an entire nation, invoking the player-leader subjectivity. Other Decision Points provide similar moments where players can leverage the Inquisition's authority to affect social change in Thedas or affirm the status quo.



Figure 6.14 - The player selects a new monarch for Orlais at the end of "Wicked Eyes, Wicked Hearts" (BioWare, 2014).

Judgments use the dialogue mechanic similarly to Decision Points. After the game's first act and the player-character's official reception of the Inquisitor title, the Inquisition moves its stronghold from the village of Haven to the mountain castle Skyhold where captured prisoners will be held in captivity until the Inquisitor sentences them to punishment. Most prisoners are characters who held high ranks within the enemy factions of the main quest such as the leader of a terrorist mage group named Magister Alexius, but they can also be characters who appeared in optional quests. Using the dialogue mechanic, Judgments offer players the opportunity to

comment on the transgressions of these characters and then decide their punishment. These fates can range from keeping the prisoner in captivity to applying the death penalty with possibilities for merciful sentences that may even lead to forgiveness if the Inquisitor has chosen certain Inquisition Perks like Arcane Knowledge (Figure 6.2). Judgments underscore the Inquisitor's responsibility for embodying the values of the Inquisition, allowing them to be merciful, ruthless, or find a compromise that otherwise benefits the organization. Although the Inquisitor clearly holds responsibility for the fate of the prisoner, these decisions involve a more limited sphere of influence than Decision Points and a less complex set of ethical questions. As such, Judgments reinforce the Inquisitor's authority through similar processes as Decision Points, but they are likely to subjectivize players into assuming the player-leader identity to a lesser extent.

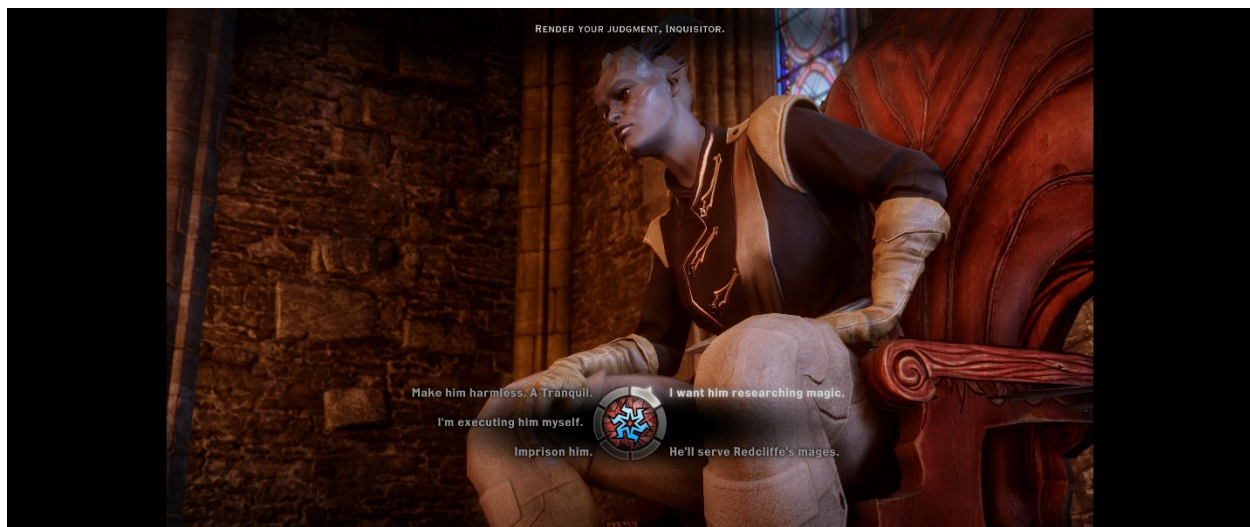


Figure 6.2 - Using a dialogue option revealed by the "Arcane Knowledge" Inquisition perk, the Inquisitor renders judgment on Magister Gerion Alexius, former leader of the Venatori (BioWare, 2014).

Both Judgments and Decision Points offer evidence of the player-leader's influence primarily through the narrative domain. The narrative context of the choices, especially for the Decision Points, frames these moments as having the potential to profoundly impact the societal structures of Thedas or the ethical tenor of the Inquisition. However, the procedural consequences for these decisions can vary from significant to minor. Choosing whether to ally

with the Mages or Templars in the first Decision Point results in the opposite group becoming a primary enemy faction for the rest of the game. This is a significant ramification that leads to players pursuing several distinct quests in the game's latter half. In contrast, choosing to ally with Empress Celene, Ambassador Briala, or Duke Gaspard at the end of "Wicked Eyes, Wicked Hearts" has little to no consequence in the procedural or narrative domain.

Choices made during Decision Points or Judgments will sometimes result in the presence of specific Operations. If players have taken the Arcane Knowledge perk before judging Magister Alexius, they can choose to keep Alexius as a prisoner and use his knowledge of magic to conduct research into the Fade rifts. This opens a new operation at the War Table that allows players to gain a powerful item for future use. In addition, the War Table quest-chain involving the Grey Wardens mentioned in the previous chapter can only appear if players choose to ally with that group instead of exiling them. As a result, these decisions do influence the possibilities for future organizational action of the Inquisition through the procedural domain, but they mostly subjectivize the player into assuming the player-leader subjectivity through narrative context that frames the Inquisitor as responsible for making impactful choices. These decisions thus implicate several elements of the player-leader, primarily the expression of values, the assumption of responsibility, and the ability to exercise influence. The player-leader is effectively invoked by these narrative dynamics, but it is rendered much more concrete by how the choices influence the Inquisitor's followers through the Approval system.

### *Approval*

Approval is a metric tracked by the game that reflects the Inquisitor's "likability" among the nine NPC companions that can be recruited as potential members of their party (Knight & Musa, 2014, p. 7). Each of these companions holds distinct worldviews and values that are

reflected by the system. How the player chooses to approach the major Decision Points and Judgments in the game will have significant effects on each companion's approval. For example, the elf-mage Solas will "greatly approve" if the player chooses to ally with the Mages in the game's first major Decision Point while Sera, who is distrustful of magic and mages, will disapprove of this decision. Similarly, when rendering judgment on captured political prisoners in the Inquisition's Stronghold, Vivienne will approve of harsh sentences whereas Blackwall will support the offering of second chances. Players are notified on the side of the screen whenever such a change in approval occurs, and this happens many times during both dialogue scenes and can also occur in exploration sequences (Figure 6.3). If the approval of certain companions drops too low, players may encounter a dialogue scene in which the character expresses their disdain for the player-character before departing the Inquisition of their own volition. On the other hand, high approval ratings can lead to the acquisition of new quests, more personal information about NPCs, and the development of friendship between the Inquisitor and their companion.



Figure 6.3 - The Inquisitor's judgment on Alexis results in Approval changes to most of the nine companions.

Companion approval is also affected by how the Inquisitor chooses to express themselves when in direct conversation with an NPC. In between exploring the environments of Thedas,

players will return to the Inquisition’s stronghold to manage their inventory, pursue operations at the War Table, and speak with the characters who comprise their “Inner Circle.”<sup>32</sup> These characters reside in personal spaces throughout the stronghold and players are encouraged by various elements of the game’s interface to approach and interact with them. The quest journal contains a heading labeled “Inner Circle” that suggests “strengthening ties with [companions] is all but essential to succeed” (Bioware, 2014, “Inner Circle”). One gameplay tip that can appear during loading screens provides the advice to “Talk often to your companions at your stronghold. They’ll have opinions about your adventures” (Bioware, 2014, Loading Screen Information). These elements of the in-game interface explicitly urge players to consistently engage these characters in dialogue to form personal relationships that extend beyond the instrumental and task-focused elements of preparing for battle.

These conversations offer the opportunity to inquire into the backstories and worldviews of the Inquisitor’s Inner Circle. They also frequently require players to engage ethical questions that influence companion Approval. Vivienne holds strong opinions on the need to maintain control over mages in Thedas and will ask the Inquisitor about their opinions on how power should be wielded or what they think would be an appropriate solution to the mage-templar conflict (Figure 6.4). Advocating for free mages and suggesting that order and discipline are secondary concerns to the player-character results in Vivienne losing Approval for the Inquisitor. As such, speaking with companions often entails engagement in an influence process with followers where the player makes choices that express values about the world. This reflects the core elements of the player-leader heuristic and ensures that dialogue between the player-

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<sup>32</sup> In addition to the nine companions, the “Inner Circle” includes the Inquisitor’s advisors Leliana, Josephine, and Cullen. While some of the advisor characters are romanceable and they do have specific companion quests, their approval is not tracked by the game. However, they are still characters who the player is encouraged to speak to. Most of this chapter will focus on the nine companions for whom Approval is measured.

character and their companions routinely subjectivizes players into assuming the player-leader subjectivity.

The changes in companion approval are governed by numeric statistics. Approval can range from Hostile (-75 to -30) to Cold (-29 to -5) to Neutral (-4 to 34) to Warm (35-74) to Friendly (75-125). When a companion “Slightly approves” of something, their approval will increase by 1, if they “Approve” it will increase by 5, and if they “Greatly Approve” it will increase by 20.<sup>33</sup> The same degree of change applies for actions that are disapproved except they decrease Approval (ie. -1, -5, -20) (*Approval (Inquisition)*, n.d.). Unlike the Power and Influence systems, players are unable to identify their exact Approval rating with each character; both the precise numeric quantification and the descriptor such as “Neutral” are unavailable to view anywhere in the game. This is notable because it diverges from previous games in the series where the precise change to Approval was indicated on screen and its exact measurement was legible in a menu (Jong, 2013, p. 70; *Approval (Origins)*, n.d.). In *DAI*, the only way to understand how characters view the Inquisitor is to speak with them.

When players go to speak with companions in their stronghold, the dialogue lines with which the NPCs will greet and say goodbye to the Inquisitor will change depending on their Approval. If Cassandra Pentaghast is Hostile toward the Inquisitor, she will greet them by saying, “Surely you have better things to do” and bid farewell with “As you wish.” Meanwhile, if she is Friendly with the player-character, she will greet them with the line “What do you need, my friend?” and bid farewell by saying, “Another time, then” (*Cassandra Pentaghast/Approval*, n.d.). *DAI*’s Approval system therefore presents a twist on the quantification that Andrew Baerg (2012) asserts is core to role-playing games. Quantification is still present, and players can

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<sup>33</sup> “Greatly Approve” can actually result in variable increases anywhere from 10 to 30, but 20 is the most common (*Approval (Inquisition)*, n.d.)



“game” the Approval system by trying to maximize their approval with specific characters, but it is unlikely for players to understand exactly how the system works the first time they play the game. By obscuring this quantification from the player, *DAI* ensures that the relationships players develop with their companions feel like a more natural development between two team members who are negotiating disparate worldviews while pursuing common goals. This development and growth are further emphasized through the presence of companion quests and crisis scenes that reflect companions’ opinions of the Inquisitor.



Figure 6.45 - Discussing the concept of "power" with Vivienne (BioWare, 2014).

### ***Inner Circle Quests and Crisis Scenes***

The closeness of these fictional relationships is also reflected through how Approval determines the possibility space in which players can interact with their Inner Circle. The ability to pursue romantic relationships with companions is a central element of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* with much research being conducted on how these romances engage LGBTQ+ representation and how fans create mods that expand this aspect of the game (Collins, 2020; Navarro-Remesal, 2018; Østby, 2016; Pelurson, 2018). Approval governs whether these romances are possible with players being unable to romance companions who disapprove of the

player-character. Furthermore, every companion in the game has an “Inner Circle quest”<sup>34</sup> players can undertake that will reveal more details about their personal backstory and allow the Inquisitor to become closer with them. Most of these Inner Circle quests require players to achieve a threshold of approval (typically +35 or “Warm”) with the character before they can be acquired.<sup>35</sup> These quests, both romantic and platonic, are some of the most engaging narratives in the game, often revealing the motivations and beliefs that underlie a companion’s worldview. Thus, in a similar way to Power, Approval acts as a regulating structure that presents these quests as rewards to players who have earned them by gaining the trust of with their companions.

The approval system and the companion quests that accompany it also diverge in significant ways from previous implementations of similar design structures in role-playing games. Chris Patterson (2015) asserts that the *Mass Effect* series configures players as a “multicultural umpire” who manipulates their team members through dialogue exchanges so that they can “strategically maneuver these teammates against an enemy” on the battlefield (p. 212). To support this case, Patterson identifies that gaining a character’s “loyalty” by completing their companion quest in the *Mass Effect* series unlocks their “hidden abilities,” reconfiguring relational behaviors that might be interpreted as supporting personal growth into actions aimed at honing a more effective weapon (2015, p. 212). This perspective dovetails with Jennings’s (2022) concern that the authoritarian affordances for world-savior characters typically revolve around violent action (p. 330). The presence of such elements would constrain the practice of leadership toward producing violent ends, an ethical perspective that would require critique.

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<sup>34</sup> This is an archetype of quests in BioWare games that are known more colloquially as “companion quests” or “personal quests.”

<sup>35</sup> The three exceptions are the personal quests for the advisors, Josephine, Cullen, and Leliana, which instead become available at predetermined moments in the narrative progression.

While *Dragon Age: Inquisition* certainly contains elements of neoliberal multiculturalism (Voorhees, 2012), it eschews the unlocking of these “hidden abilities” through companion quests, putting the emphasis squarely on the character’s personal growth (Jørgensen, 2010) rather than their potential combat prowess. Completing companion quests in *DAI* grants players very little in terms of material reward. The quests usually reward players with a useful piece of combat equipment, but these are not much more powerful than items the player can procure elsewhere. Depending on when the quest is completed, the item may not even be that helpful. Furthermore, presenting equipment as a reward disentangles companion quests from the essentialism of equating personal growth with increasing combative abilities. Completing personal quests provides some benefit to the player through the procedural domain in the form of Power and Influence increases and new equipment, but these same rewards can be achieved by completing any other quest. *DAI* motivates players to pursue Inner Circle quests because they provide narrative depth to characters and allow those NPCs to self-actualize. Critically, unlike other role-playing games, that self-actualization is not fully entangled in military effectiveness. In this way, *DAI* uses the Approval system and Inner Circle quests to position companions not merely as resources to be used, but as social entities with beliefs, emotions, and desires.



Figure 6.56 - The Inquisitor sits at a gathering with almost all of their friendly companions (BioWare, 2014).

Inner Circle quests can be acquired if NPCs develop a high approval of the Inquisitor, but there is a similar moment of recognition if the approval of a companion drops to a significant degree. Under conditions in which companions are actively hostile toward the Inquisitor, players may encounter a “crisis” scene in which the NPC criticizes the player-character for their ethical failings and threatens to leave the Inquisition for good. This means that if players lead the Inquisition in a manner that clashes with a companion’s values, they will need to take extra care to engage them in one-on-one conversations where they will have the opportunity to ameliorate their approval levels. Patterson (2015) indicates that one of the player’s goals in this context is therefore “to appease, threaten, or systematically and ideologically control the teammates” (p. 212). Such a critique is essential in a videogame landscape that emphasizes violent action as a central gameplay pursuit and outcome, however, it is less applicable to *DAI* than other BioWare games because the companions of *DAI* are not impotent or passive resources to be controlled. The continual judgment that manifests from their fluctuating approval ensures that the player-character is capable of influencing their companions as well as being influenced by them. The player must engage the social process of dialogue to communicate and find common ground

amongst viewpoints that sometimes seem diametrically opposed, learning to compromise at times and discuss tensions openly at others. Essentially, companions in *DAI* are active followers.

The Approval system is thus the primary method by which *DAI* models followership behaviors. Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) suggest that followers are “actors who ‘engage, interact and negotiate’ with leaders to influence organizational understandings and produce outcomes” (p. 95). This process of negotiation intertwines with the influence attempt of the involved parties to create and structure the process of leadership with followership behaviors specifically referring to the actions by which beings defer to or resist influence attempts and reciprocally claim or grant the identities of leader or follower (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Conventional approaches to leadership tend to overlook these behaviors, viewing followers as passive, but the Approval system of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* denies this viewpoint by simulating followership behaviors and values. As stated, the approval system configures NPC companions as fully-fledged entities with their own worldviews. They are beings who, in some circumstances at least, are capable of acting independently of the player-character. They make decisions about how to engage in leadership/followership processes, when to dissent, and when to defer to the player-leader’s authority. Thus, the Approval system in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* contributes significantly to the subjectivization of the player-leader by making players responsible for the wellbeing of their followers. Players are reminded of this responsibility constantly due to the omnipresence of dialogue scenes, the interface’s clear indication of when companion Approval changes, and the game’s encouragement to engage companions in conversation.

### ***Approval as Evaluation of Leadership***

Given that any dialogue response could hypothetically result in a change to Approval, this system ensures that every dialogue scene in *DAI* is an influence process. Dialogue scenes,

especially those involving the Herald's core Inner Circle, bring forth the player-leader subject as they allow players to express values that will influence the Approval of their companions. This ultimately characterizes Approval as the core metric by which the player's leadership is evaluated in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*.

Unlike Influence and Power, Approval in *DAI* is firmly presented as a negotiated influence process. It can be altered during the exploration phase of the game,<sup>36</sup> but most of the changes in Approval occur when players are engaged in relational behaviors. Furthermore, whereas Power and Influence increase in steady increments regardless of how players complete tasks, Approval can evaluate a player's actions as either beneficial or detrimental; it can increase *and* decrease. In other words, it is possible for the player to fail in their leadership role and lose followers through crisis scenes. It is also not always easy to know how approval will change when making choices throughout the game. This unpredictability ensures that, unless they are using a guide to direct their decisions, players will have to make in-the-moment decisions about the values they express while considering the context of their companions' beliefs and the situation at hand.

Unlike the binary loyalty designation in the *Mass Effect* series that is almost impossible to break once it is achieved, Approval with a companion can change regardless of what has happened in the past. Simply because the Inquisitor has become "friendly" with Sera does not mean that Sera will always approve of everything the Inquisitor does. This more flexible relationship ensures that, whereas Power and Influence will always increase as long as the player

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<sup>36</sup> Some companions will present players with minor companion quests. These often don't involve a dramatic narrative but represent small goals the player can work toward as they explore the game world. Varric requests that the Inquisitor destroy deposits of a dangerous magical ore called red lyrium and Cassandra asks for your help tracking down and killing several warriors who betrayed the Templar order. While these actions happen outside of dialogue and often involve task-focused behaviors like combat, they do still affect Approval ratings. Such quests provide rewards in terms of increases to Power, Influence, and Experience points as well as the characters expressing gratitude for the player's actions.

plays the game, Approval can only be gained if players continually and appropriately navigate their relationships. This does not always mean telling NPCs what they want to hear. Many characters appreciate a good debate or like to be challenged. Furthermore, the player can disagree with companions and still maintain a “Warm” relationship with them. In this way, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* does not judge players’ leadership choices by preventing progression or by assigning a number to the Inquisition’s army. Instead, leadership is evaluated as a relational practice. If players build stable, mutually supportive relationships, the game rewards them with interesting stories and the affirmation of their companions.

In contrast, *DAI*’s crisis scenes act as an intervention for the player-leader who fails to establish such relationships. Crisis scenes can vary in their presentation. Some characters, like Blackwall and Cole, will always abandon the Inquisition once the Inquisitor has earned their ire while other characters like Sera and Dorian can be talked into staying, at least until the task of defeating Corypheus is accomplished. All these scenes depict NPC companions accusing the Inquisitor of some moral failing. For Cole, it’s a failure to be kind to individual people whereas Blackwall accuses the Inquisitor of irreparably damaging the social fabric of Thedas (Figure 6.6).



Figure 6.67 - Blackwall questions the Inquisitor's judgment, leaving the Inquisition after this interaction (BioWare, 2014).

This is important because the player can make any decision they want in *DAI* and still complete the game. They can side with the Mages or Templars, they can allow the empress of Orlais to be assassinated or not, they can exile or ally with the Grey Wardens; no decision the player makes will cause the game to evaluate the player as a failed leader and stop their progression. As a result, the player-leader's actions are always configured as effective, even if they contain immoral dimensions. Such a view of leadership not only reinforces leader-centricity, but also the strongly authoritarian logic that “the ends justify the means.”

Crisis scenes in *DAI* are therefore critical for ensuring the game does not endorse such perspectives. Although any action the player-leader takes may produce “results” in the sense of progressing toward the goal of defeating Corypheus, *DAI* uses these crisis scenes to signpost that certain actions can result in leadership failures, specifically the failure of the player-leader to represent the community to which they are accountable. Understood in relation to *Dragon Age: Inquisition*'s “Lead Them or Fall” tagline, the Approval system thus emerges as the only aspect of the game in which there is any possibility for the player to actually “Fall.” Should players encounter a crisis scene with a single character, it might be attributed to a difference in



worldview. If multiple characters reach this crisis point, however, the game's judgment is resounding. Helping companions reach self-actualization leads to them calling the Inquisitor a trusted friend. Allowing their frustrations to fester results in them labeling the player-character a tyrant. One of these has a much more positive connotation.

Varric provides a clear example. Presenting a skeptical temperament, Varric is difficult to anger, but his Approval can be lost if players elect to make self-aggrandizing comments about the Inquisitor's status or select choices in Decision Points that negatively affect him personally. Since he is incapable of leaving the Inquisition,<sup>37</sup> Varric's crisis scene features him attempting to engage the Inquisitor in a frank conversation about their methods rather than excoriating their decisions. Once his Approval has dropped to "Hostile," Varric will note that the Inquisitor's actions have left "a lot of innocent people ground into the dirt" (Figure 6.7). If players justify their actions in light of the current threat, Varric will counter:

There's always a war! Or a cause! Or an injustice! ... This 'All that matters is the goal, and fuck the consequences' thing of yours? I've seen where that road leads. The world has enough problems, Inquisitor. It doesn't need another monster. Try not to become one (BioWare, 2014).

Through this dialogue and the other crisis scenes that mirror its articulation, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* rejects the notion that outcomes are the only critical component of leadership. This rejection is somewhat muted by the fact that it is mostly presented in the narrative domain, but it does identify that a core requirement of leadership is the practice of a moral code that reflects the values of a leader's followers. Without it, the leader-follower relationship will break down, resulting in the loss of followers and, as a result, the failure of leadership (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014,

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<sup>37</sup> Several characters will stay with the Inquisition regardless of the player's choices to ensure that the player will always have companions to join them while exploring the open world environments. This includes the first three companions the player encounters from the game's prologue: Cassandra, Varric, and Solas.

p. 83; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012). The Approval system is the core procedural element through which this argument is actualized and presents the view that leadership is socially constructed through the interpersonal negotiations of leaders and followers.



Figure 6.7 - Varric objects to the idea that "the ends justify the means" (BioWare, 2014).

Viewing Approval as an evaluative system makes sense. *DAI* does not have a conventional “morality meter” (Formosa et al., 2021) like *Fallout 3*’s (2008) karma system or *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*’s (2001) Light and Dark meter. Instead of presenting seemingly objective ethical judgments, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* locates its morality within its characters or, more specifically, in its relationships. Consalvo (2016) even notes that players find this type of moral gauge more natural and productive of ethical decision-making than binary measurements like *Mass Effect*’s Paragon and Renegade meters. Players must consider not just their own ethical perspectives, but those of the entities within the virtual world, complicating their decisions. By positioning Approval as the central moral system and making it the primary method by which player actions and therefore player leadership is judged, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* presents a procedural argument that leadership is fundamentally relational.

The Approval system ensures that every action the player takes, whether in relation to combat, dialogue, or the War Table, is filtered through the awareness that their decisions influence the relationship dynamics with their companions. This awareness makes the sense of responsibility that is central to the emergence of the player-leader subjectivity almost constant. Ramifications of leadership choices, both small in the appearance of optional dialogue and significant in the form of Inner Circle quests, are produced by the dynamics of Approval. Changes to Approval always stem from ethical positions or values for which the player either expresses support or disdain. The Approval system is also a clear metaphor for the social relationship between leaders and followers. Finally, through this system the followers of the player-leader, the Inquisitor's companions, are presented as "active and dynamic agents" (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p.87) who react and respond to the influence of the player-leader.

Even so, the player-leader subjectivity may wax and wane in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. Exploring the beautiful environments of Thedas can sometimes obscure the social process of leadership and the ability to exert influence in the wider Inquisition may be limited by the narrow application of the Influence and Power systems, but the Approval system consistently reminds players that there are entities who *choose* to follow them, that they are accountable to those entities, and that maintaining those relationships is their responsibility. As a result, leadership in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* is evaluated as a relational practice.

One important thing to note about the Approval system is that it only links the Inquisitor to their companions on an individual basis. There is no overarching Approval system for the Inner Circle as a whole or the wider Inquisition. This structure essentially constructs a set of nine dyadic relationships between the player-character and their party member companions, invoking the leader-follower dynamics associated with leader-member exchange theory.

### ***Dyadic Relationships and Leader-Member Exchange Theory***

Leader-member exchange theory (LMX) was one of the first leadership theories to emphasize the relationships between leaders and followers rather than focus solely on the behaviors and traits of the leader (Dugan, 2017, p. 151; Northouse, 2022, p. 300). LMX positions these relationships as dyadic partnerships and suggests that leadership emerges through the “incremental influence” that can develop as those relationships deepen (Uhl-Bien, 2006, p. 656). Should the individuals involved in the dyad consistently invest trust and resources into one another, these relationships will progress through three stages of the Leadership Making Model: stranger, acquaintance, and mature partnership (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 230). The stranger phase describes how two team members interact as “strangers occupying interdependent organizational roles” whose interactions are “purely contractual” with leaders and followers interacting only when required to complete tasks. Relationships move beyond the stranger phase into the acquaintance phase when an “offer” is made by either party for an improved working relationship, resulting in “increased social exchanges” where not all interactions are contractual, sharing “greater information and resources, both on a personal and work level.” A similar transition occurs when the dyad moves into the mature partnership phase where loyalty and support are firmly established in the relationship and there is a high degree of mutual respect and reciprocity in the relationship” (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 230; Northouse, p. 311, 2022). This three-stage heuristic was developed for organizational leaders to approach working relationships from the perspective of career advancement, but the interpersonal dynamics described here resonate with the dyadic relationships that appear between the Inquisitor and their companions in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. The Inquisitor’s possible relationship with Iron Bull serves as a useful example.

Players first learn of Iron Bull early in the game when they speak to a messenger from the “Bull’s Chargers,” a mercenary group whose leader is interested in meeting with the Inquisitor. They can navigate to an appointed location, discover the Chargers in the midst of combat, and join them to vanquish the enemy. After this brief combat sequence, Iron Bull meets with the Inquisitor in a dialogue scene, introduces himself, and explains his concern for the Breach as an existential danger. Iron Bull wishes to commit his mercenary group to the Inquisition’s cause (Figure 6.8) and also identifies himself as a spy for the theocratic foreign government of the Qunari, stating that he wants to be completely honest and that he believes this seemingly untrustworthy position can actually make him even more useful to the Inquisition.

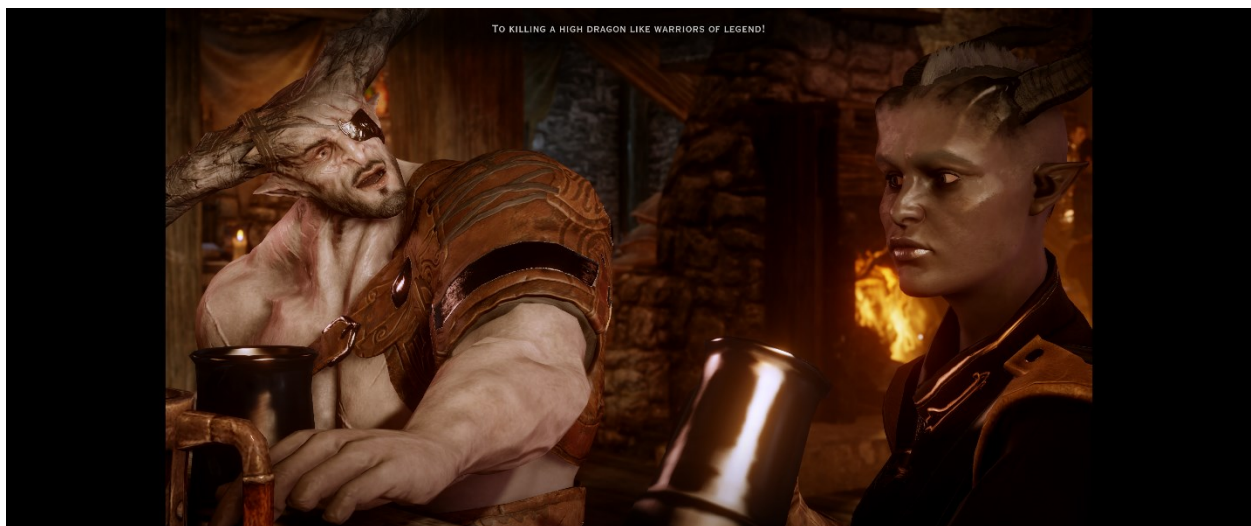


Figure 6.8 - Iron Bull proposes a contractual relationship (BioWare, 2014).

Most companion introductory sequences play out according to this structure where a character will introduce themselves, identify their skills, and request to join the Inquisition. This demonstrates how *DAI* quickly navigates from the stranger phase to the acquaintance phase. While Iron Bull has a charismatic personality and is remarkably honest with the Inquisitor, the entire conversation is built around a contractual exchange: the Inquisition can pay the Chargers and, in return, they receive the Chargers as a supplementary force and Iron Bull as a potential

member of the Inquisitor's party; Iron Bull is a foreign spy, but that also means he can provide the Inquisition spymaster with covert information. This boils down to "The Breach is going to end the world; we can work together to stop it." Through this, Iron Bull lays out a potentially straightforward and instrumental relationship between himself and the Inquisitor, making an offer that suggests moving into the acquaintance phase if the player accepts it.

This next phase is readily apparent the next time players return to their stronghold. Iron Bull has taken up a prominent position in the headquarters, allowing players to engage him in conversation. They can ask him several questions immediately with most of them relating to the task of closing the Breach or abstract discussions about Iron Bull's home country. Players can also bring Iron Bull on their adventures around Thedas, integrating him into their exploration party and getting to see his fighting skill firsthand. These behaviors align with the dynamics expected of a relationship in the acquaintance phase. Iron Bull is no longer a stranger. He is available to contribute to the Inquisition whenever the player calls upon him and is also open to speaking with the Inquisitor in a less contractual manner, but those conversations still rarely enter deep personal territory for the Inquisitor or Iron Bull.



*Figure 6.98 - Iron Bull and the Inquisitor start to become friends (BioWare, 2014).*

By frequently including Iron Bull in your exploration party and expressing leadership values in dialogue that express confidence and a desire to fight, players can gain Iron Bull's Approval. As this progresses, players can ask him increasingly personal questions and occasionally trigger context-dependent scenes that indicate the development of an amicable relationship between leader and follower (Figure 6.9). This culminates in the presentation of Iron Bull's Inner Circle quest: "The Demands of the Qun." This quest involves him, the Inquisitor, and the Bull's Chargers joining a Qunari strike team to demolish the supply lines of Corypheus's forces. The lead-up to the quest portrays Iron Bull in an uncharacteristically restless mood as he expresses anxiety over the Qunari's proposed alliance (BioWare, 2014).

This concern proves warranted. During the events of the battle, the Bull's Chargers find themselves in a compromised position and Iron Bull is forced to make a decision: alert the Chargers to the impending danger and, in doing so, sacrifice a Qunari warship engaged in battle, or let the Chargers die to save the warship. In the moment, Iron Bull is unable to make a decision, instead turning to the Inquisitor and entrusting the player-character with the fate of the battle (BioWare, 2014). It is a choice between Iron Bull's two lives, the life of a spy and the life of a conscientious leader. Regardless of choice, the next time players speak to Iron Bull at the stronghold they trigger a dialogue scene that corresponds to the choice players made. If the player sacrificed the Chargers, the Inquisitor joins Iron Bull to mourn them. He is clearly shaken by the experience, though he asserts that it is "a good reminder of who I really am" (BioWare, 2014). If the Chargers were saved, Iron Bull has been excommunicated from his former government and fights off an assassination attempt before confiding in the Inquisitor that he has mixed emotions about his new place in life. He affirms, however, that "Whatever I miss, whatever I regret...this is where I want to be" (Figure 6.10).



Figure 9.10 - Iron Bull affirms his enduring loyalty and support for the Inquisitor (BioWare, 2014).

The emotional confiding from Iron Bull in both scenes demonstrates the depth that this dyadic relationship has developed, but the scene that results from saving the Chargers is the one that truly indicates the high degree of reciprocity and mutual respect that can form between Iron Bull and the Inquisitor.<sup>38</sup> The pair begin as absolute strangers, but through a consistent process of mutual investment, they can become confidants who trust one another and are deeply committed not just to accomplishing tasks by working together, but to ensuring each other's personal wellbeing. Through these actions, the Inquisitor develops a mature partnership with Iron Bull. Such a process is similarly achievable with each NPC that has an Inner Circle quest, including every companion and the three advisors on the Inquisition council. For some characters this climax of their personal quest results in the naming of the dyad as "friendship" while others, like Iron Bull, provide a more indirect form of emotional certainty in identifying the relationship as fully matured. The development of each relationship is only achievable if players continually invest in the processes of dialogue and sensemaking to build the character's Approval,

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<sup>38</sup> In the game's "Trespasser" downloadable content, Iron Bull will betray the Inquisitor if players allowed the Chargers to die (BioWare, 2015). This configures saving the Chargers as the decision that results in the development of a true mature partnership between the Inquisitor and Iron Bull. While this project does not extend its analysis to cover the downloadable expansions for *DAI*, this piece of information is relevant to note.



communicating with their followers to establish not just a working relationship, but a meaningful personal connection.

This development holds extra weight because these relationships might not form in this manner. During personal quests, players often have opportunities to act in opposition to their companion's will, betraying their trust and producing a significant loss of Approval. Such actions can result in interactions that are similar to crisis scenes where a visibly upset companion will demand the Inquisitor explain their actions. Through these dialogue scenes, players can demonstrate concern for the companion's comfort and a willingness to listen to their opinions, but they can also choose to reject the NPC's feedback and force them to leave the Inquisition. Consequently, the terms of these dyadic relationships are constantly in negotiation, with both player and NPC holding the power to terminate the relationship's development if reciprocal respect cannot be established. Progressing to the mutual trust and support of LMX's "mature partnership" phase is therefore not a guarantee; it is a choice that must be consistently affirmed by the actions of both the player and their companions.

Leader-member exchange is a useful model for conceptualizing the leader-follower dynamics of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* because the primary procedural representation that the game uses to implicate the player-leader subjectivity relies on dyadic conceptions of team relationships. In contrast, leadership theories like team leadership or collective leadership, which center the mutual and interconnected relationships of many entities, are not represented in the game's Approval system, nor are they reflected by the Influence or Power systems. It is important to be skeptical of this representation of leadership because LMX is a theory that has evolved significantly since its original inception. When the theory was initially advanced, emphasis was placed much more heavily on the actions of the leader as the central motivator of

the relationship's development (Collinson, 2011, p. 183; Northouse, 2022, p. 309). Even despite scholarly attempts to ameliorate this privileging of the leader position, LMX still retains this aspect of leader-centricity because its very name necessitates a distinction between leader and follower; the roles are presented as belonging to distinct entities and not as fluid identities that are constructed in context through interpersonal behaviors (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 88).

These dynamics are also present in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. Companions are capable of initiating the transitional moments between the various phases, but it is ultimately the player who causes these transitions to happen by seeking the characters out to engage in conversation and by navigating dialogue so as to influence the companions' Approval. This inevitably calls forth Stogdill's (1991) fourth leadership trait, "Drive to exercise initiative in social situations," reinscribing elements of the individualistic trait theory (p. 81). Furthermore, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* provides a clear distinction between leader and follower roles. While some characters such as Iron Bull and Sera are identified as leaders in relation to other groups, they only ever appear as subordinates to the Inquisitor. They can exert influence through dialogue and by making their approval or disapproval known, but this is always presented in a context where the Inquisitor holds the most power to move the relationship forward or disband it.

This leader-centricity is especially clear in Iron Bull's Inner Circle quest. Even though the decision at the end of the quest is related to Iron Bull's followers and has the most significant consequences for Iron Bull's life, *DAI* still presents the player-character as the entity who holds the authority to make the choice. This despite Iron Bull being explicitly identified several times throughout the game as a leader in his own right. As such, the representation of leader-member exchange theory that appears in *DAI* retains a leader-centric focus due to the game's privileging of the player's agency over that of other virtual entities. In the decades since leader-member

exchange's development, there has been a greater tendency to develop relational leadership models that center the interplay of leader and follower behaviors more than the hierarchical roles that they inhabit (Ospina et al., 2020; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Uhl-Bien, 2021). And yet, leader-member exchange remains an appropriate heuristic for examining *Dragon Age: Inquisition* due to the game's same proclivities toward role-based and leader-centric processes.

### **Conclusion**

*Dragon Age: Inquisition*'s tendencies toward individualism, leader-centricity, and neoliberal values have been discussed at length in previous chapters. With the context of the Approval system, however, we can see that there are some tensions at play in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*'s depiction of leadership. Through its Approval system and depiction of leader-follower relationships, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* attempts to simulate a fictional representation of leadership in which the social process is firmly a relational practice of reciprocity and mutual support. From this perspective and from its emphasis on helping characters achieve self-actualization, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* might be viewed as advocating for a postheroic perspective of leadership. The identity of the Inquisitor can certainly be assumed in such a way that the player-leader will search for ways to let their companions make decisions, support growth toward the NPC's own leadership behaviors, and encourage an integrity-rich moral compass. However, the game's underlying mechanics make it impossible to practice a dispersed form of leadership in which the player-leader and their companions occupy truly equal footing. The Inquisition is represented as a large organization by both the narrative and procedural domains, but it is a community over which the player-leader wields almost complete hierarchical authority, the only slight exception being the complex relationships modeled by the Approval of

the Inquisitor's nine companions. Meanwhile, the narrative of *DAI* presents the Inquisitor as deserving of this authority due to their specialness as a world-savior character.

Thus, *Dragon Age: Inquisition*'s numerous systems and narrative contexts do not depict a singular framework for what leadership is. They contain various intersecting, contradicting, and sometimes reinforcing rhetorics that privilege diverging sets of values. The overarching structure of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* depicts a world-savior narrative (Jennings, 2022) that reinscribes themes of neoliberal quantification and individualism, romanticizing leadership and the power that comes with it. But there are some elements that push back against this depiction. Approval is the central system through which *Dragon Age: Inquisition* attempts to recover leadership as an ongoing social relationship, not as the pure exercise of the player's predestined agency. The final and most important challenge to the individualistic and romanticized status quo of leadership comes from a source outside of the game: the player.

## Chapter 7 - The Player as Leader

We have so far considered the traits that *Dragon Age: Inquisition* associates with the leader positionality, the systems by which the Inquisition is presented as a widespread organization, and how the game presents leader-follower relationships. However, there is one more element that is necessary for configuring the process of leadership in *DAI*: the player. While this analysis is focused on analyzing *Dragon Age: Inquisition* as a text, and therefore emphasizes how opportunities to engage leadership are constructed by the game rather than how players view the act of leadership, it is still critical to consider the possibilities for players to appropriate those systems to define their own approach or view of leadership. This chapter therefore does not seek to make claims about how players understand or approach leadership in *DAI*. Instead, it identifies the avenues that are available for players to transgress the values expressed by the game as described in the previous chapters.

### ***Transgressive Play***

As stated in the literature review, transgressive play is a process where players appropriate a game's designed systems to pursue activities and meaning that would otherwise not be intended by designers. It emerges in play behaviors that are "not part of the game's intended repertoire" and thus represent a "symbolic gesture of rebellion against the tyranny of the game" (Aarseth, 2007, p. 132). This manifests the "appropriative act of playing" discussed by Sicart (2013, p. 9), an act that Ruberg affirms as meaningful by stating that "All players are entitled to explore and experience alternative desires through video games" (Ruberg, 2019, p. 19). We can therefore understand transgressive play as playing against the instrumental nature of many games or deliberately playing counter to the values embedded in a game's mechanics and narrative.

Most of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*'s systems afford few opportunities to perform transgressive play largely due to the game's emphasis on the player making decisions according to predefined options. When delegating tasks at the War Table players can only select between a maximum of three available choices. Players are not able to craft their own responses in dialogue scenes; they must select from the already provided options. They are only able to apply Power or Influence within highly constrained situations. Through these decision-making processes, players experience a structure of directed freedom throughout *DAI*. They are capable of defining the ethical values of their Inquisitor within the range of perspectives offered by the game but are incapable of expanding beyond those choices.

One method of transgressing these structures involves a rejection of some of these central systems. Aside from initiating main quest missions and opening new regions, most War Table Operations are entirely optional. A player may therefore ignore this system except when absolutely necessary to practice an ethic that protests the steady militaristic spread of the Inquisition. To articulate a more specific ethical perspective, they may choose to only delegate tasks to Josephine to lead the Inquisition in a more diplomatic and nonviolent manner. This approach opposes the intended reward structures of the War Table, playing in a deliberately inefficient manner to express a different set of values not intended by the game. Such choices will not be accounted for by the game until the very end when the epilogue will identify the advisor the player relied on most in completing operations. This role thus appears similarly to someone who might role-play *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* as a vegan; the game may not recognize the choice in its procedural or narrative domain, but the choice remains meaningful to the player (Westerlaken, 2017). A player who approaches the War Table in this manner does not reject the player-leader subjectivity. Instead, they come to understand that subjectivity so

deeply that they see their leadership values reflected in all the choices they make, regardless of whether the game acknowledges them procedurally or narratively.

Similarly, although *Dragon Age: Inquisition* encourages players to engage their companions in dialogue between missions, they are entirely capable of neglecting these relationships. This allows players to role-play as a neglectful leader, one who chooses to renounce the game's emphasis on the development of mutual trust in relationships. Unlike the example with the War Table, the game's Approval system will remain to judge players regardless of their intent.<sup>39</sup> By choosing to neglect the maintenance of their interpersonal relationships, or by electing to intentionally damage them, players can appropriate *DAI*'s Approval system to model unhealthy or toxic leader-follower dynamics. Such choices often result in the player-character expressing conventionally domineering and highly individualistic rhetoric. While such values counter the Approval system's intent of encouraging relational and caring dynamics, these choices make plain the more subtle support for individual leader control that undergirds the War Table, Power, Influence, Judgment, and Decision Point systems. As stated in chapter 4, choices that emphasize leadership as stemming from an individual source are frequently possible within *DAI* while enacting dispersed models of leadership is less feasible. Thus, even when players find dynamic meaning within the boundaries of these transgressive practices, they are still constrained by the directed freedom that predefines choices and their consequences. Players actually have greater freedom to appropriate the game's constructed values through gameplay systems that might otherwise seem unrelated to leadership.

### ***Party Management and Leveling-Up***

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<sup>39</sup> Research suggests that some players will intentionally role-play unethical characters regardless of the judgment from the game's moral system (Consalvo, 2019, p. 221).

Role-playing videogames draw on a long history of conventions. Central to these conventions is the “party,” or the group of companions that joins players throughout the journey (Baerg, 2012, p. 169). Over the course of RPGs, the player-character grows in power and accumulates a collection of powerful items that they can equip to improve their abilities and increase their strength (Jennings, 2022; Jong, 2013). In addition to the player-character, players are also responsible for managing the equipment and abilities of their party companions (Baerg, 2012, p. 169; Figure 7.1). Not all RPGs provide players with opportunities to make in-game choices that express their values, and this limits the degree to which the player-leader subjectivity can emerge. However, the incredibly common system of party management does model a leader-follower relationship in which players are responsible for determining the development of several entities who enact followership behaviors. In this way, RPGs that feature a party of companions might subjectivize players into assuming a minor but still tangible form of the player-leader subjectivity.

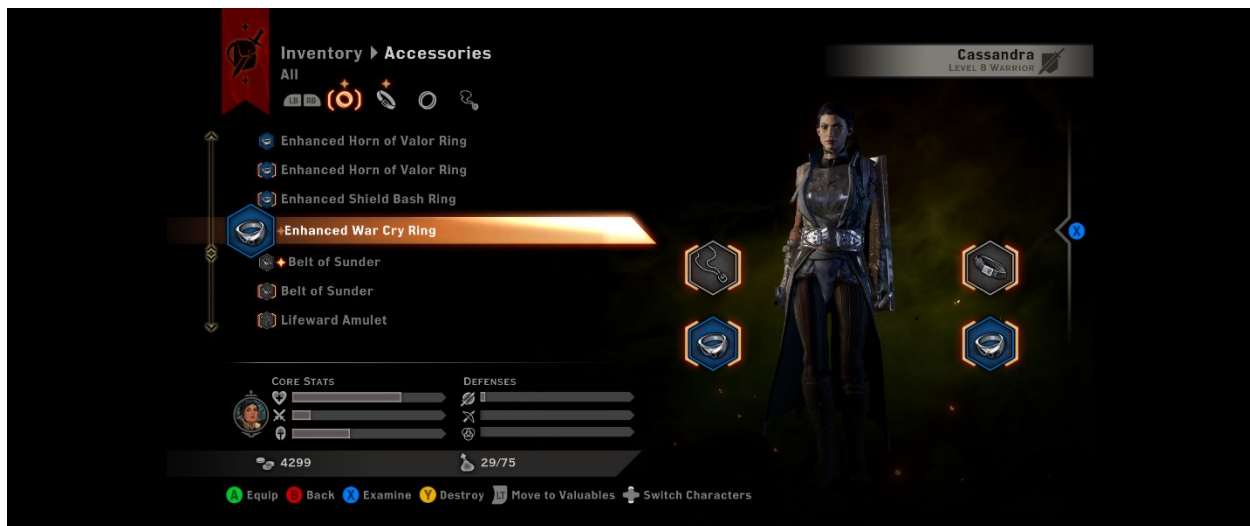


Figure 10.1 - Players are responsible for managing the equipment of all their NPC party companions.

These systems of management are so common that they are unlikely to subjectivize players into assuming the player-leader subjectivity without additional narrative context. It is



often taken for granted that players must direct AI-controlled companions on their journey (Baerg, 2012; Jennings, 2022; Patterson, 2015; Voorhees, 2012). The choices of how to equip them and what skills they should develop may be construed as behaviors that influence followers, but they do not immediately appear as moral expressions of values because they are so commonsensical to the conventions of the RPG genre and videogames as a whole. As discussed previously, management is an important element of leadership, even though it has a more instrumental focus. The core distinction drawn between leadership and management lies in leadership's relational expression of values whereas management is less-concerned with values and more focused on task-completion. I argue, however, that games which effectively subjectivize players into assuming the player-leader subjectivity may do so to such a degree that players can appropriate the conventional management systems of role-playing games and imbue them with values.

While the inventory management system of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* forces players to occupy a directive role of determining characters' equipment to make them strong enough to ensure progression, the game's leveling system offers an alternative. As players explore the world of Thedas, defeat enemies in combat, and complete quests, they earn experience points for their player-character and their companions. Once they accumulate enough experience points, characters level up, gaining a boost to their innate statistics and receiving one skill point. These skill points unlock new combat abilities based on a character's class. A mage can unlock the Lightning Bolt skill, allowing them to cast an electrical spell to stun enemies; a warrior can learn the War Cry ability that forces enemies to attack the sturdy class instead of the less physically hardy mage or rogue (BioWare, 2014). Under the player-leader heuristic, leveling up characters and selecting new skills for them would traditionally be understood as management rather than

leadership because the actions do not seem to express values. Characters unlock these abilities and players increase their strength to defeat more difficult enemies. It is the standard process by which players progress through the game. Some games, however, include a mechanic that can link with a subjectivized player-leader identity to reveal latent value judgments in these choices: auto-leveling.

Auto-leveling is a mechanic present in many RPGs that applies skill points without the player's direct intervention. Instead of the player directing how an NPC's skills develop, the game itself will administer the skill points. This distribution can be random, but the auto-level system of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* and many other games allocate skill points according to predetermined characteristics of the NPC character. For example, every class in *DAI* contains four skill trees, each with eight different special abilities for characters to unlock and use in combat. The four skill trees for the mage class correspond to different element types: spirit, fire, ice, and storm. Players may choose to level up any of the mage-class characters, Vivienne, Dorian, or Solas, however they choose. They can direct Solas to learn mostly Fire spells while Dorian learns spells in the Storm category and Vivienne develops some facility with all four. If players use the auto-leveling system, these characters will develop skills differently from each other, despite starting with the same base character statistics and occupying the same class. Using auto-leveling, Vivienne will primarily adopt skills from the Ice skill tree and Dorian will predominantly learn Fire spells (Figure 7.2). Auto-leveling is therefore not randomized and it is not designed to create the most powerful version of each character. Instead, it reveals elements of the NPC companion's personality and preferences.

This mechanic appears in numerous games and is often treated as an afterthought; however, through the lens of transgressive play, it becomes a powerful tool for decentering the

player as a game's primary agentic being. Reconceptualizing our view of agency to understand that it can emerge from non-human entities (Keever, 2021; Muriel & Crawford, 2020), auto-leveling is a mechanic that offers NPC companions the agency to pursue skills that they want to learn and become the kind of being they desire to be. There are dozens of ability combinations that the player could construct to direct Vivienne's progression as a mage. But there is only one that she pursues for herself, and it is revealed by using the auto-level mechanic. This progression is predetermined by the developers who designed how auto-leveling would affect each character, but within the context of playing *DAI*, the development of these abilities will appear to the player-leader as stemming from the NPC characters themselves. Such a practice still emerges within the context of combat abilities and therefore carries with it elements of Jennings's authoritarian agency (2022, p. 330). Nonetheless, the player is capable of deferring their position of agency to other entities within this context, offering a process that counters tropes of both the world-savior and hero-leader.



Figure 7.211 - Choosing to auto-level Vivienne will mostly unlock abilities from the Ice skill tree (BioWare, 2014).

As a form of transgressive play, several constraints emerge when pursuing the practice of auto-leveling as a method of expressing leadership values. The central limitation is that

characters can only have eight active skill abilities equipped at a time. Every time a new skill is learned, it will be assigned to one of the eight skill slots. Once characters obtain more than eight skills, the ninth ability will not auto-equip and there is no way to have the skills shuffle between options or let NPCs choose which to equip, requiring players to exercise manual control over the abilities a character will have access to. Thus, although auto-leveling appears to grant NPCs agency in determining the skills they learn, the player-leader's capacity to defer their authority is still constrained by other elements surrounding the mechanic. In my first playthrough of *DAI*, I pursued auto-leveling to decenter the player-character's authoritative hierarchy as much as possible, even choosing not to change the equipped skills of my party members. This meant that I had no way to access the more powerful abilities later in the game and reveals that auto-leveling characters in this manner is, indeed, an appropriative form of play that was not intended by the developers.

This lack of intention behind auto-leveling's usage is reinforced by how little *DAI* draws attention to it. There is no tutorial that identifies the mechanic, nor is there a loading screen tip that notes the pros and cons of its use. It is simply presented as a small, easily overlooked button prompt in the corner of the Character Record menu. When players press the button, the game displays a screen that asks, "Do you wish to automatically spend all of your ability points?" (Figure 7.3), almost warning players off from committing to the process. This additional screen acts as a warning, suggesting that players should retain their agency to determine how characters improve their abilities. Consequently, the auto-level mechanic seems designed mostly as a convenience for players who are not interested in selecting new abilities for characters when they level up. However, this does not undermine the transgressive potential of the mechanic. As noted, auto-leveling characters presents them as having personal preferences for specific

abilities. Regardless of BioWare's intentions for designing the functionality of auto-leveling, this is a clear element of the mechanic's dynamic meaning. Though it may go overlooked by many players, a player-leader who seeks to affirm the personal agency of their followers can recognize this dynamic meaning within *DAI* and pursue auto-leveling not as a convenience, but as a conscious expression of the value of their companions' agency.

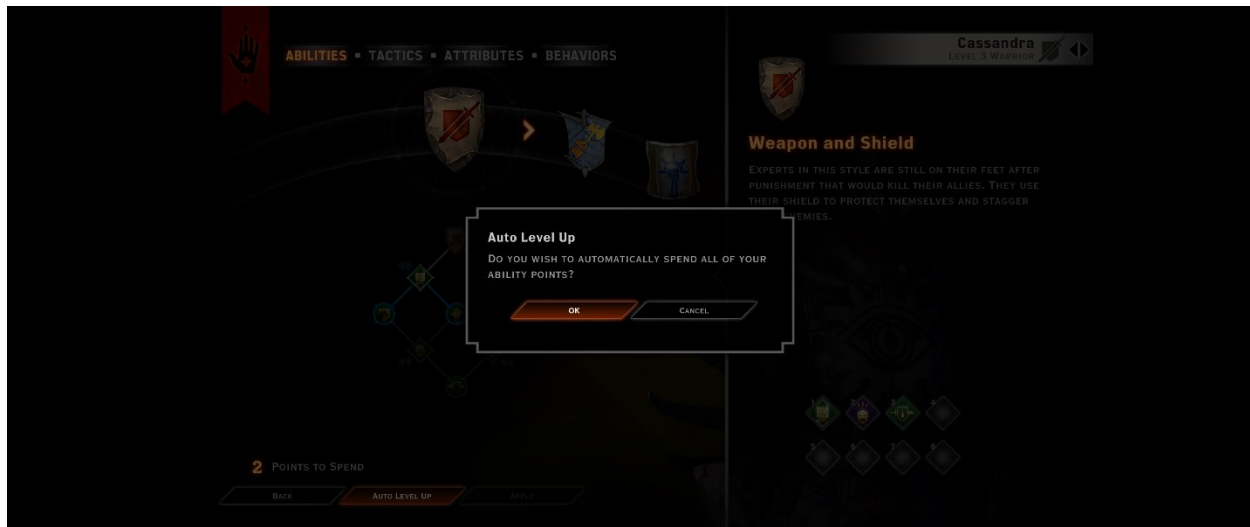


Figure 7.3 - The "warning screen" that appears when players initiate the auto-leveling process (BioWare, 2014).

Viewing the auto-level mechanic in this way clashes with conventional approaches to role-playing games and therefore constitutes transgressive play. Auto-leveling is generally ignored by players looking to craft “optimal builds” where characters become as powerful as possible (Baerg, 2012, p. 161; r/DragonAge, 2020; Dragon Age: Inquisition, [MMF\_Legacy], 2014). It is true that the auto-level system does not result in characters becoming their strongest selves, however, this instrumentalized emphasis on efficiency and optimization is a neoliberal value that sees management and leadership as value-less processes performed solely for the purpose of producing outcomes, contributing to Patterson's view that the RPG player is a “multicultural umpire” who uses companions as “weapons” that must be “ideologically controlled” (2015, p. 212). Players can therefore use the auto-level system to transgress this

instrumental perspective by practicing a different set of values within the management practices. This choice can manifest an ethos of servant-leadership by prioritizing the capacity of followers to direct their own personal growth over the pursuit of efficient task completion.

In the conventional leveling process, players exercise a unidirectional, command-and-control style of leadership that frames the player's agency as sole authority over the growth of NPCs. Applying a framework that is more reminiscent of servant-leadership (Greenleaf, 2008), the player-leader's responsibility is not to force NPCs to become powerful entities, but to create space for them to self-actualize. The auto-leveling system allows the player-leader to express values that affirm the importance of follower agency, guiding followers to become the version of themselves they choose to be instead of manipulating them as resources to be deployed on the battlefield. This battlefield is itself another potential site of transgression for the player-leader.

### ***Combat and the Tactical Camera***

In addition to managing party-members' skill acquisition, role-playing videogames frequently give players complete control over the actions of their companions during combat. This is especially true of older RPGs such as *Final Fantasy* and *Baldur's Gate*, but more recent action RPGs tend to provide a middle ground. *Dragon Age: Inquisition* occupies the latter category with combat generally occurring in real-time interactions where the player controls the Inquisitor while their companions are controlled by artificial intelligence (Figure 7.5).<sup>40</sup> In between encounters, players can modify companion "Behaviors" to increase or decrease the frequency that they use specific skills, tailoring their party's strategy before combat even begins. Players can also slow the game down and direct their companions through the Tactical Camera.

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<sup>40</sup> The player is capable of directly controlling any character they please, revealing that the player-leader's unilateral authority transcends even the player-character's embodied virtual presence. Regardless of who they directly control, the other companions will be guided by artificial intelligence. This indicates that the player-leader subject themselves, and not the player-character, is the entity who holds authority in battle.

The Tactical Camera can be triggered at any time during exploration. When activated, the game world freezes in place, allowing players to take in the chaotic information that often accompanies combat and direct their companions to use specific abilities, navigate to advantageous positions, or enact other context-sensitive behaviors (Figure 7.4). Players can then press a button to advance time while remaining in the Tactical Camera mode, enabling them to adjust their battle plans within the safety of the frozen game world, or press a button to resume real-time combat.

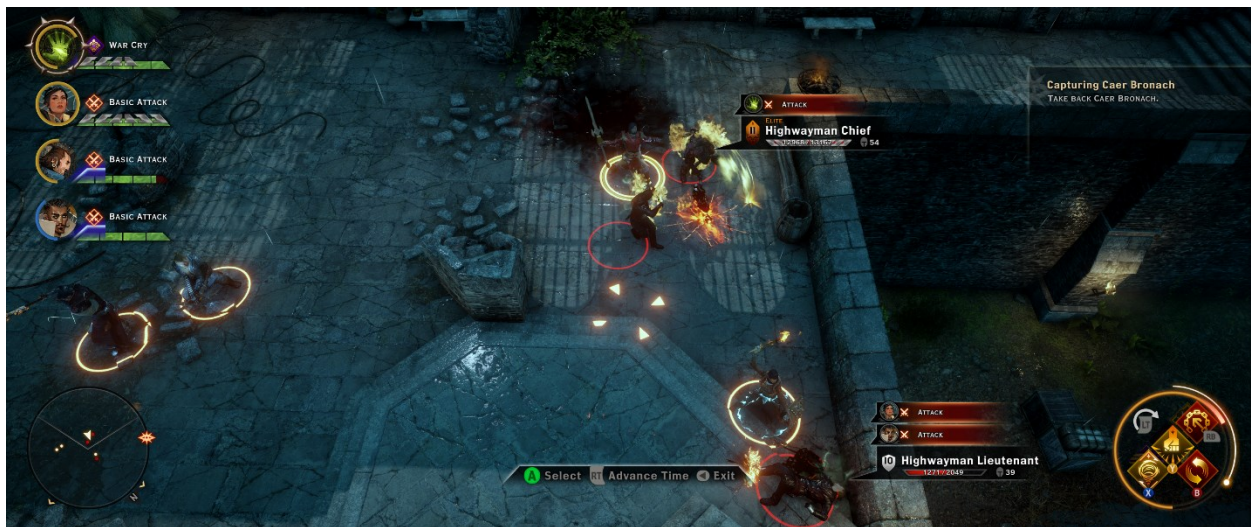


Figure 7.4 - The Tactical Camera indicates enemy placement and future actions from allies (BioWare, 2014).

The presence of the tactical camera means that players can engage in *DAI*'s combat mechanics in a flexible manner. They can play the game without using the Tactical Camera at all, solely use the Tactical Camera, or find a middle ground where players engage both real-time combat and the Tactical Camera. Promotional materials for the game suggest that this middle ground is the mechanic's intended usage with an assistant gameplay designer describing their tendency to scout a combat area first with the Tactical Camera, then play in real-time combat, and revert to using the Tactical Camera if the battle becomes too chaotic (*Dragon Age: Inquisition Official Video - Tactical View Tips*, 2015). Similar to the elements of party management and leveling up, modifying ally Behaviors and using the Tactical Camera do not

initially seem to involve the critical element of expressing values that is central to the player-leader heuristic. They are merely ways of configuring task-completion. They do, however, certainly involve management processes whereby the player-leader configures and controls how other virtual entities will act, resulting in NPC allies following the orders of the player-leader in a hierarchical structure. Despite this top-down influence dynamic, the Tactical Camera and Behavior systems remain flexible enough to be appropriated by the player for the expression of distinct values. My contrasting playthroughs of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* demonstrate this possibility.



Figure 7.5 - Combat occurring in real-time outside of the Tactical Camera (BioWare, 2014).

In my first playthrough as the Qunari mage Deyna, I improved my party member's abilities by only using the auto-level mechanic, refusing to make any changes to an ally's preferences for using abilities. In addition, while developers at BioWare suggest that the Tactical Camera was designed to give players greater strategic control over the battlefield (*Dragon Age: Inquisition Official Video - Tactical View Tips*, 2015), I used it to do the opposite. By employing



a process of cycling my currently selected character and holding down the button that advances time in the game world, I exerted no agency over the outcome of combat even through my own player-character. Battles were won or lost depending entirely on the team-based interactions of my party members. Through these methods, I sought to embody an ethos of leadership that decentered my individual authority and emphasized the agency of my companions, refusing the militaristic hierarchy of giving orders on the battlefield and allowing the personalities of my companions to emerge according to their pre-defined preferences.

In stark contrast, for my second playthrough as the Human warrior Conrad, I used these gameplay systems with the explicit purpose of removing agency from my companions and emphasizing my own status as leader. Following completion of the first few main story quests, I began engaging in combat solely through the Tactical Camera without fighting in real-time. I also set every companion's Behaviors so that they would never use a special ability unless I ordered them to do so. I began this approach to combat because it resonated with the values I set out in the selfish, commanding, and authoritarian performative identity of Conrad. In every combat situation, my allies could only perform basic attacks against enemies of their own volition. They were able to use one of their special abilities only if I directly ordered them to do so, making me and my player-character entirely responsible for almost every single action on the battlefield and casting my companions as the passive recipients of influence found in older views of leadership.

These practices also held several nuances that influenced my personal experience of playing *DAI*. Playing through combat in the domineering identity of Conrad actually presented some benefits. By controlling every movement on the battlefield, I was able to survive combat encounters and complete quests that were significantly above the current level of my party and

player-character. On the surface, this seems to demonstrate support for such controlling methods as efficient and effective. Yet, this method also resulted in combat encounters taking much more time as I had to manually input commands for each character and assess the danger of situations carefully before deciding how to proceed. This resulted in a significant cognitive load, even in basic combat encounters, and made the act of playing the game less enjoyable. It also led me to level up certain abilities for each character that were easy to use in the context of the Tactical Camera, further influencing Conrad's authoritarian approach to the development of his followers. Thus, my experience of embodying a highly controlling leader identity in *DAI* reflects how a leader who micromanages their followers can ostensibly achieve desired outcomes even while they bottleneck the progress of a team and stymie further development.

On the other hand, playing as a leader who sought to divest themselves of all authority when engaging in battle also held some difficulties. The attempts to foreground the teamwork of my followers resulted in a highly repetitive gameplay experience. Combat became less enjoyable because every encounter involved the same actions that required minimal input. Furthermore, in contrast to Conrad's approach, achieving victory through these means required the player-character and their party to be at levels that were equivalent to or greater than their enemies. Again, on the surface this seems to imply that a strong central leader is a significant boon to any working group, however, we can also view this through the light of team leadership, understanding that teams require more time to develop into fully-functioning, semi-autonomous working groups (Dugan, 2017, p. 162). This is reflected in the extra side quests players would need to complete to level up their companions and increase their capabilities. This style of play requires more time investment from the player and is therefore less efficient in terms of overall

time spent with the game, but it does produce an effective team that is actually more efficient when it engages in tasks in the future.

### ***Conclusion***

This discussion demonstrates how the combat and leveling mechanics of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* are open to appropriation by diverging player-leader identities. Rather than expressing values solely through dialogue exchanges and ethical decision-making, players can extend the leadership values that they associate with their player-character into other aspects of gameplay. These examples only represent the two performative identities I used to approach *Dragon Age: Inquisition* for this project. Different uses of the Tactical Camera, Behavior system, and auto-level mechanic are likely to exist, especially for players who might combine these affordances in different ways. The examples discussed here are not meant to reflect the totality of players' affordances to transgress the values embedded in *Dragon Age: Inquisition's* representation of leadership, nor are they intended to endorse certain ways of playing over others. Rather, they demonstrate that the commonsensical gameplay conventions of party management and combat in role-playing games contain latent value judgments about which entities involved in videogames deserve to wield authority over others. Furthermore, this chapter argues that player-leaders are capable of appropriating these mechanics to express different values by reconceptualizing these gameplay systems as extensions of their responsibilities as leaders.

The player-leader can engage in transgressive play to model a variety of leadership behaviors that would otherwise not be supported by the predefined options and intended usage of game mechanics. At the same time, transgressive play within the context of leadership contains some limitations. Its enactment is not always acknowledged by the game's procedural and

semiotic domain, and it can result in unintended consequences such as making the game more difficult or influencing additional play behaviors beyond what was initially planned. This is illustrated in the example where Deyna's rejection of hierarchical authority forced me to level up companions more before pursuing high difficulty quests. As a result, even though it does not resolve the tensions at the heart of the game's design, the potential of transgressive play opens a space for the player to reject or support the individualistic leadership values embedded in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*.

## Conclusion

The integration of leadership studies and game studies initiated by this project provides enormous potential for future research. These disciplines are more complementary than they might initially appear. Videogames are a popular medium that can represent leadership in novel ways, potentially exposing videogame players to new understandings of the concept. Meanwhile, the theoretical developments of the leadership studies field provide unique frameworks to understand the diffuse and multiple agencies that appear in virtual environments.

Through the analysis conducted in this thesis, it becomes clear that the binary positioning of “Lead them or Fall” in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*’s marketing is enmeshed within a set of player, system, and design decisions that convolute what seems like a straightforward choice. Drawing on the tenets of postheroic leadership and critical leadership studies, this thesis has endeavored to untangle these dynamics and deconstruct the conventionally individualistic leader image to present leadership as the result of collective processes that emerge from a network of entities who mutually influence one another. Leadership is fundamentally relational, appearing in unique forms through the distinct contextual situations that shape its emergence.

Such a distributed and contextual view is relatively unique in popular culture representations of leadership. This thesis argues that, as a processual medium, videogames are uniquely suited to depicting the complex network of leadership processes when compared with the structures of other mediums. And yet, videogames often represent leadership according to the same values of hierarchy, meritocracy, and authority that appear in conventional approaches to the concept. In so doing, they frequently emphasize neoliberal logics of rationality and quantification. Such representations must be named and critiqued for videogames to simulate more thoughtful, democratic, and ethical leadership frameworks.

### ***The Player-Leader Heuristic and Dragon Age: Inquisition***

This thesis provides the first step in such a critique by advancing the player-leader heuristic. The player-leader is a subjectivity that is assumed by the player of a game when that game convinces players that they are acting as a leader in relation to the game world. This can be achieved when the player-character is identified as holding an explicit leader role and/or when gameplay mechanics allow players to perform actions that are associated with leadership. Actions that constitute this process of leadership in games entail making choices that influence other entities in the game world and express a set of values, distinguishing acts of leadership from other in-game actions. Through these processes and the modeling of their consequences, the player develops a sense of responsibility for entities that act as their followers, leading to the assumption of the player-leader subjectivity.

This player-leader subjectivity can emerge in a variety of games, even those that, on the surface, do not seem to contain themes of leadership. Games that emphasize the player-character's accountability and responsibility to a community, like *Dragon Age: Inquisition* and *Frostpunk*, are likely to produce a consistent and strong form of the subjectivity while the player-leader subjectivity in other games may wax and wane depending on how gameplay conditions shift from moment to moment such as in *Fallout 3*. The player-leader heuristic is thus a descriptive framework for examining the relationship dynamics that emerge between player-characters and other virtual entities.

The usefulness of this heuristic was demonstrated by conducting a textual analysis of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* utilizing Consalvo & Dutton's (2006) Game Analysis Toolkit methodology and the techniques developed by Theresa Tanenbaum (2015) for performing close readings of videogames. Following two playthroughs of diverging performative identities

constituting 120 hours of gameplay, my analysis of *DAI* shows how the structures and content of this game construct a representation of leadership that ultimately relies on neoliberal values of individualism and quantification even while certain components push back against those values.

The case study began with an examination of *DAI*'s narrative frame. By presenting the Inquisitor as an archetypal world-savior, the story of *DAI* contextualizes the player-character as an individualistic leader and associates them with certain traits and attributes. This manifestation of the leader-centric trait theory results in the presentation of a romanticized image of leadership, something that is further emphasized by the player's inability to defer their hierarchical authority to other virtual entities. In other words, the player has no choice but to occupy the role of a special or preordained individual leader.

This leader-centricity extends to the procedural representations of the Inquisition as a whole, manifested by the quantified systems of Power and Influence over which the player maintains sole discretion. These systems are deeply connected to the War Table, an in-game mechanic that allows the player to delegate tasks to advisors and apply the Inquisition's might and resources. Although the War Table provides moments that require players to engage their ethical frameworks and contains some elements that trouble the neoliberal value of efficiency, this element, alongside the Power and Influence systems, are inextricably connected to martial forms of action. This reveals an association with the hegemonic masculinity and violent action that characterize authoritarian forms of agency (Jennings, 2022), conflating the leadership processes that appear within these systems with the pursuit of self-serving optimization. In this way, leadership in *DAI* is presented as a form of authority that the player-character has an innate right to hold above other virtual entities, implicitly characterizing leadership as the responsibility of elite individuals. Indeed, this centrality of authority and control might be viewed as

emblematic of leadership in videogames at large. By granting players control over the actions and development of other virtual entities, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* and other games like it extend the player's sense of agency while diminishing the agency of other virtual entities. The common sense of leadership in *DAI*, and potentially other games, consequently manifests through the player's privileged access to agency and control.

While such leader-centric and individualistic representations characterize much of the player's possible actions in *DAI*, the game also depicts the relationality of leadership through the dialogue mechanic and its associated Approval system. Engaging in dialogue allows players to make statements that convey distinct sets of values whose expression influence the Approval of non-player characters. The nine relationships between players and their NPC companions therefore suggest that leadership in *DAI* is relational, however, this system is unfortunately not fully emancipated from the logics of neoliberalism. Approval is still a quantified system and the Inquisitor's specified role as explicit "leader" grants them a primacy in each relationship that revives elements of leader-centricity. Still, the emphasis on mutual relationships that emerges from the interwoven dialogue and Approval systems aligns much closer to postheroic views of leadership, producing a tension between these systems and the individualism that underlies the War Table, Power, and Influence systems as well as the game's narrative context. Though it is simplistic in some regards, *DAI*'s Approval system hints at how videogames might represent leadership as a networked process rather than an individual's responsibility.

Critically, the player can intervene in these systems, allowing them to explore egalitarian or overtly authoritarian approaches to leadership. These directions are understood as a form of transgressive play wherein players can appropriate gameplay structures to pursue their own desires. In *DAI*, much of this can occur when players extend their assumption of the player-



leader subjectivity beyond the systems and gameplay mechanics that might conventionally be associated with leadership. The lenses of postheroic and critical leadership open the potential to consider seemingly inconsequential actions as leadership, possibly untethering the concept from the goal-oriented optimization of neoliberalism. By appropriating the game's mechanics, players hold the potential to construct more critical forms of leadership. These alternative leadership styles may not always be acknowledged by in-game reactions or consequences, but their practice can still be meaningful to the player-leader and their personal expression of leadership values. Players thus hold some degree of power in negotiating the meaning of leadership in videogames.

Through this analysis, it becomes clear that leadership is not only a central theme of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, but that several of the game's structures are in conflict over the values expressed by its representation. Despite this tension, *Dragon Age: Inquisition*'s primary narrative context and the intended usage of the game's mechanics ensure that the Inquisitor of *DAI* remains a romanticized hero-leader figure who must manifest the individualistic values of neoliberal rationality. The danger with this presentation of individualistic leadership is that it may contribute to understanding such leader-centric approaches as "common sense," reaffirming false dichotomies like the "leader-follower" binary. In discussing the trend by which the genre of neomedievalism performs an anachronistic merger of feudalism and neoliberalism, Carolyn Jong (2013) states that

it is possible that [RPG] games, as a whole, promote the idea that neoliberal rationalities are representative of historically transcendent, absolute truths...By virtue of being everywhere at once, neoliberalism is represented as *the* way of living in the world, rather than *a* specific, and politically motivated ideological framework (p. 121-122).

In a similar way, the focus on individual, heroic leadership and authoritative decision-making roles demonstrated by the Inquisitor's status as a world-savior figure runs the risk of cementing leader-centric philosophies as *the* way of leading in the world rather than *a* specific ideological framework of leadership. Such a perspective would preclude the possibility that videogames can offer spaces to model egalitarian and social justice-based approaches to leadership, ignoring the ethical and collectivist values that can be surfaced by such perspectives. This thesis has endeavored to identify and critique this perspective, advocating for the creation of narratives and systems in videogames that represent more democratic and critical forms of leadership.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

This thesis was successful in integrating the fields of leadership studies and game studies into a textual analysis of the videogame medium, but there are areas to develop further. To start, the scope of the project ensured that I could only analyze a single case study. This thesis therefore provides insight into how a videogame can shape representations of leadership that subjectivize players and communicate ideas about the concept to them, but distinct genres of games from various industry sectors may present the topic differently. A cursory glance at videogames that contain themes of leadership seems to indicate that there is a tendency toward leader-centric depictions. However, even in such games, there may be design structures like *DAI's* Approval system that present more relational values or that allow for players to engage in transgressive forms of play. Understanding *DAI* as a popular and well-known representation of leadership provides a foundation that will allow future research to explore how the concept is represented differently depending on the industry contexts and videogame genre from which those representations emerge.

In addition, there are theoretical considerations from both leadership studies and game studies that could not fit the scope of this project or its focus on the formal properties of videogames. One such element is the subject of identity. Identity is a vital element of leadership to consider, especially when understanding its practical application. Women and people of color must often engage in impression management to ensure that their attempts at leadership are not undermined by cultural biases (Dugan, 2017, p. 285; Liu & Baker, 2016, p. 423-424; Sinclair, 1995). Identity is also an important consideration in game studies with research identifying and critiquing a conventional bias toward depictions of videogame characters who are represented as white and male (Gray, 2018; Keefer, 2023, p. 5; Shaw, 2015, p. 156; Williams et al., 2009). As such, the concern for the identity of leaders in the physical world and player-characters in the virtual world reveals another link between leadership and game studies that scholars can explore. Such a consideration requires additional theoretical frameworks and indicates an important avenue for future research. Additional perspectives would be enormously generative for critiquing the Western neoliberal frameworks that underlie much of the leadership studies field.

Furthermore, with players and play as a focus point, the other virtual entities involved in *DAI* were somewhat backgrounded. This led to an emphasis on the player-leader's responsibility to a community of followers. As Andrew Baerg notes, however, individual responsibility is a core element of neoliberal rationality and, as a result, is fundamental to the neoliberalism of role-playing games (2012, p. 169). Indeed, the naming of the player-leader subjectivity might unavoidably engage elements of leader-centricity by focusing attention on the actions of the player themselves and setting them apart as a special entity within the game world. However, it is important to note that the current construct of the player-leader resulted from an analysis of a AAA role-playing game designed for entertainment. It is possible that the values underlying the

emergence of the player-leader are contextual, much like the process of leadership itself. The player-leader thus might not appear as a neoliberal figure in games that emerge from disparate industry sectors or in games that present a critical view of leadership. Further research in this area might reveal how such contexts do or do not alter the core ideology undergirding the player-leader subjectivity.

Still, the element of responsibility at the center of the player-leader remains as a leader-centric quality, and it is something that should be reevaluated as more research explores the topic of leadership in games. The identification of the player-leader in this thesis primarily serves to focus analysis and illuminate the relationships and power dynamics connected to that subjectivity. Additional research may build on this construct to further develop its utility and broaden its applicability. Alternative concepts such as “reciprocity” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 20) could replace “responsibility” and emphasize the mutual accountability of player-leader and NPC follower, potentially providing more generative avenues to think through the concept and de-center the primacy of the player.

Another avenue for future research stems from this project’s emphasis on textual analysis of in-game representations. While this provides valuable information about the messages embedded in videogames, additional insights might be offered by interviewing both the developers who create these representations as well as the actual players who engage them. For example, the relationships between the Inquisitor and their NPC companions may mirror the model of leader-member exchange theory, but that does not mean the theory was consulted as a basis for that representation. Interviewing developers could reveal the degree to which they consider formal leadership models and philosophies during the design process and how they think through the values expressed by representations of leadership in games.

It is also important to investigate how players understand and interpret the concept of leadership. Do players learn leadership lessons from single-player videogames that they can then apply in real life? Are they thinking about how leadership actions are framed in-game and whether the individualism of leader-centricity is warranted? Does “leadership” merely equate to “power fantasy” in their eyes? Game studies scholars have investigated how players interpret the moral choices that many games offer (Consalvo et al., 2019; Formosa et al., 2021), but such an analysis has not addressed how players understand these choices in relation to the concept of leadership. Research on this topic could therefore interview players to explore whether their understandings of leadership are influenced by the representations they experience while playing videogames.

### ***Conclusion***

Leadership is a powerful, but often ambiguously defined concept in our contemporary world. This ambiguity frequently results in popular culture representations that elide the complexity of the concept and reify leader-centric views that privilege individualism. This stands in stark contrast to developments in the leadership studies field which increasingly emphasize the centrality of networked collectives above individual entities for producing ethical and democratic change.

My work intervenes in the fields of game studies and leadership studies by identifying that leadership is a common theme in videogames, but one that often goes overlooked and understudied. Consequently, videogames tend to represent leadership in seemingly natural or commonsensical ways, endorsing values that privilege quantified forms of hierarchy, meritocracy, and objectivity. Occupying a leadership role in a game is not simply a power fantasy, but a positionality that contains embedded worldviews and implicit values. By

foregrounding the theme of leadership in videogames, these invisible logics become legible to critique, opening the potential for them to be replaced with more critical or communal approaches to the concept. In this way, videogames might be able to contribute to an “alternative vision” (Chandler & Kirsch, 2018, p. 308) of leadership, one that decenters the hegemonic values of individualism and optimization and instead emphasizes ethical values, equitable power dynamics, and mutually supportive relationships.

In advancing the concept of the player-leader and defining what it means for an in-game action to constitute leadership, this thesis renders visible the power dynamics that manifest between the player and other virtual entities. The player-leader heuristic provides a framework through which the lenses, models, and vocabularies developed by leadership studies scholars can be applied to analyses of videogames. This thesis pursued such an analysis by using this heuristic and a number of formal leadership models to examine how the leadership structures of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* express ideas that are emblematic of neoliberal rationality and control even when, on the surface, they seem to suggest more egalitarian practices. Despite this tendency, there are elements of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* that challenge those hegemonic values, and this nuance enables players to experience and enact a wide range of leadership behaviors within the game. *Dragon Age: Inquisition* thus illuminates the complex web of systems that can make the process of leadership in videogames a tangible and ultimately meaningful experience for the player.

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