

Remediation and Video Games: Bookwork in *Dragon Age: Origins*

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“The human heart,” writes Brother Genitivi, self-described religious scholar, “is more powerful than the greatest weapon, and when wounded, it is capable of the blackest of deeds.” These words are from BioWare’s popular fantasy role-playing game, *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009); they are projected on an ink-on-parchment caricature within a ragged, bloodstained book titled simply, “Journal.” Although books are perhaps peripheral much to the gameplay of *Dragon Age*, the fictional world of the game is one of books. Lofty bookshelves dominate the library of the mage’s tower (Figure 1), and there is a prevalence of tomes in the sprawling estates of the nobility. Yet the books of *Dragon Age* are not merely representational of the material objects defined as books; instead, *Dragon Age* actively participates in *bookwork* in a *remediated* context.

Remediation, according to Bolter and Grusin’s definition in the book *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, is “the formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms” (Bolter and Grusin, 273). This paper will define bookwork as how the narrowly defined idea of the book is simulated and/or transformed in its remediated context. In the scholarly work that has been done on bookwork thus far, relatively little has emerged concerning the remediation of the book in video games. *Dragon Age: Origins* extensively remediates the books in context-sensitive environments. Using several categories of bookwork in the visual arts, which often overlap in *Dragon Age*, this paper will engage with the various remediated book forms utilized in the game. Finally, this paper calls for a new term or paradigm for understanding the functions and aesthetics of the remediated book in video games; ultimately, an original method of critical engagement with these digital entities must encompass both the gamic aspects and expressive components of the in-game books.

The Journal of *Dragon Age* consists of, among other data such as quest logs, what is known as the Codex (Figure 2). The Codex is a compilation of textual documents—ranging from “note[s] between wealthy paramours” to textually rich micro-narratives of lore on the fictional world—which the player can collect throughout his/her travels in the game. Yet the Codex radically reconfigures the book to operate as a functional data network; the left side of the page is essentially a menu for selecting the different entries, whereby the player can press an icon of the Codex entry number to display the text. Furthermore, longer entries feature a scrolling bar to provide access to the remainder of the text not immediately shown on the page; even the idea of page turning is conspicuously absent. Even so the aesthetics of the interface—which include pages that are bound together, script-like font and a faded background image of a quill and parchment—suggest that this layout expresses a book composed of inscribed documents. It is this tension between the Codex’s materiality as a book and its practical gamic interface that makes it what Thomas Vogler describes as “the French term for the treated book: *livre detourné*, or ‘deviant book’” (Vogler, 456). In *Dragon Age*, the fact of the Codex’s transgressive design reveals a remediation of the book that privileges the principles of immediacy; although the book commands an aura of authenticity with its tattered, bloodied pages and an exaggerated facsimile of inscribed documents, it has been updated for operational purposes. The cumbersome task of flipping through pages—even a simulated one involving minimal manual effort—is replaced by a functional interface, compartmentalized topically and numbered for rapid switching between entries. There are no pages on the left side of the book; the deviance of the Codex is its

materiality—or perception thereof—ripped from the bindings, denatured, and uncoupled across the spine.

If the Codex's gamic purpose is to amass data collected by the player and present it in a practical network, the question arises: why does the game use a book instead of any other medium, or merely text in a window? Answering the question relies on an analysis of the genre conventions at play in *Dragon Age*. The game participates in the fantasy genre wherein the mainstay fantasy tropes are present, including the good/evil dichotomy, ubiquitous magic, elf and dwarf humanoids, and a world of pre-Modern technology. The dominant media form of *Dragon Age* is the book; as previously stated, books are inescapably present in the environment, haunting the walls and tables of many locales. A culture of book making likewise appears in the game; many Codex entries are supposedly taken from extant books in the world, such as the entry "The Sacred Ashes of Andraste," which is appended with the author and title: "From Thedas: Myths and Legends by Brother Genitivi." Furthermore, the game insists on the same bookish interface for non-literary operations. The Character and Inventory screens feature nearly identical stylistics as the Journal (Figure 3), and the Map device similarly lays out its contents across the pages of a book. The presence of this book culture within a fantasy setting suggests that the logic of nostalgia for a pre-Modern and fictional past operates in the game. Such an aesthetic supports the notion that the interface of the Codex is a book in order to reinforce the deeply immersive feel of a digitized fantasy world.

There is, however, a platform specificity component to the Codex. This paper discusses the Windows/Mac OSX version of the game. The two console versions, which are on Microsoft's Xbox 360 and Sony's PlayStation 3, portray the Codex without the book aesthetics. The left and right side of the Codex are displayed as two separate windows with text on a black background. The question remains open as to why half of the available platforms use the book aesthetics for the Codex and the other half do not. The answer almost certainly lies within development; limited software resources and the difficulties of transferring a game across platforms would account for the lack of the original Codex design.

Other representations of the book in *Dragon Age* signal the capricious nature of the book as a material thing; invariably, the books that are given more in the way of physical shape are still deviant in certain respects. A better descriptor than merely an object would be what Thomas Vogler calls the "book-object" (Vogler, 448). "Book-objects" are fundamentally, to use Vogler's phrase, "not books, even though their whole being exists in relation to the book," and they "can be 'troped' books, figurative constructs where the book as general cultural artifact is the subject for representation, imitation, or violation" (459).

A striking example of what in painting or sculpture would be categorized as a "book-object" occurs in a quest from the Witch Hunt downloadable content (2010); as part of the main quest line, the player must hunt for clues on a mysterious artifact in the library of the mage's tower. Several actionable books are available for the player to engage with (Figure 4); selecting one of these books will display a list of sections for the player to choose from. Choosing the correct option—or narratively phrased, searching through the correct section in the proper book—will lead to yet another hint that will involve more searching through books until the completion of the library hunt portion of the quest line. When in dialogue with the book, the book lies open in front of the player's avatar (Figure 5). Its visual representation acknowledges the three-dimensionality of the book; the Journal, conversely, appears to lie flat on the screen. The indexes of the library quest are sculptural artifacts, and they lack any rendering of text on the surface of their spuriously bound pages; the text is instead displayed at the bottom of the screen

in the form of dialogue options. Yet the object is still culturally coded as a book. In Byron Clercx's avant-garde sculpture "Purification," the book-object, which is made out of soap, retains the sculptural integrity of the book; below it, written on a towel, hangs the text of the piece, which is part of the poem "Le Savon" by Francis Ponge (Figure 6). Although the text is abstracted from the book frame, Clercx's art is "troped" as a book. The game encourages the interpretation of the evacuated indexes as books with a similar attention to the construction of the book; furthermore, descriptors such as "This book is in the School of Entropy section" indicate that the object is indeed a facsimile of a troped book that is more "realistic" than the Codex.

The iconography of the book-objects and the deviant books of *Dragon Age* play into another classification of bookwork, Johanna Drucker's so-called "book-as-repository-of-secret-knowledge-cliché" (Drucker, 2008). According to Drucker, Cyan's adventure game *Myst* (1993) makes use of the "cliché" in that the "cover of the book contains links and clues" the player must find in order to advance the game. Such books might be named "quest books," referring broadly to book-objects that must be consumed or searched through in order to complete any goal in a video game. As with the array of journals in *Myst* that must be scoured through for meaningful signs, the book-objects of the library and certain Codex entries contain textual material to be decoded within a specific hermeneutics and utilized for the completion of a task. The Codex entry "A Carved Elven Tablet" is one example of how the Codex functions as a quest book. Although it is titled as a "tablet," the difference between this entry and others in the Codex is only nominal; the entry is still logged in the Codex and displayed on the page. The text of the entry describes a "strange tablet" depicting a ritual performed in a sequence of steps; it is necessary to find and collect this entry in order to complete the quest "The Mage's Treasure." Once the player finds the room with the objects described in the text—including an altar and a fountain—she must enact the ritual according to the Codex entry. Doing so necessitates the decoding of the entry as a set of instructions, whereby each action is a performative gesture the player can only do once the signs have been interpreted; indeed, the objects that the player must act upon will be non-actionable items without the collection of the Codex entry. The transformation from a piece of the static environment to objects infused with semantic importance—in other words, actionable—codes the book as a vessel of knowledge to be probed for meaningful signs. The quest data to be illumined by this sub-category of the remediated book is hardly enlightened knowledge; it is instead the answer to a puzzle created by the possession of the very object that holds the answers.

The various remediations of the book in *Dragon Age: Origins* play out several cultural assumptions surrounding the book through their acts of bookwork. When extended to a video game, the visual art categories of bookwork—often overlapping and with perhaps shifting boundaries—bring to light the underlying functionality of not only the game system at large, but of the singular book itself. The indexes, like the Codex entries, are deviant in their own ways; underlying these altered forms is the prerogative of effective gameplay. Whereas deviance in artist's books such as "Purification" signifies the troped iconography of the book, the transgressive book forms in *Dragon Age* go beyond this signification. In the game, a book is a linked data network whereby flipping pages is replaced by pointing and clicking, which underlines the wishful expectations of the non-game book object as equally functional. Yet the game holds on to a simulated aesthetic that recognizes the culturally inflected units of a book sans text: pages bound together to make a cohesive, yet dynamic, whole. A new framework for discussing bookwork in video games must include this interchange between game and book by calling attention to the intrinsic relationship between functionality and programmed deviance.



Figure 1 – Library at the Circle Tower



Figure 2 – Codex entry #91: “The Sacred Ashes of Andraste”



Figure 3 – Character screen



Figure 4 – Indexes

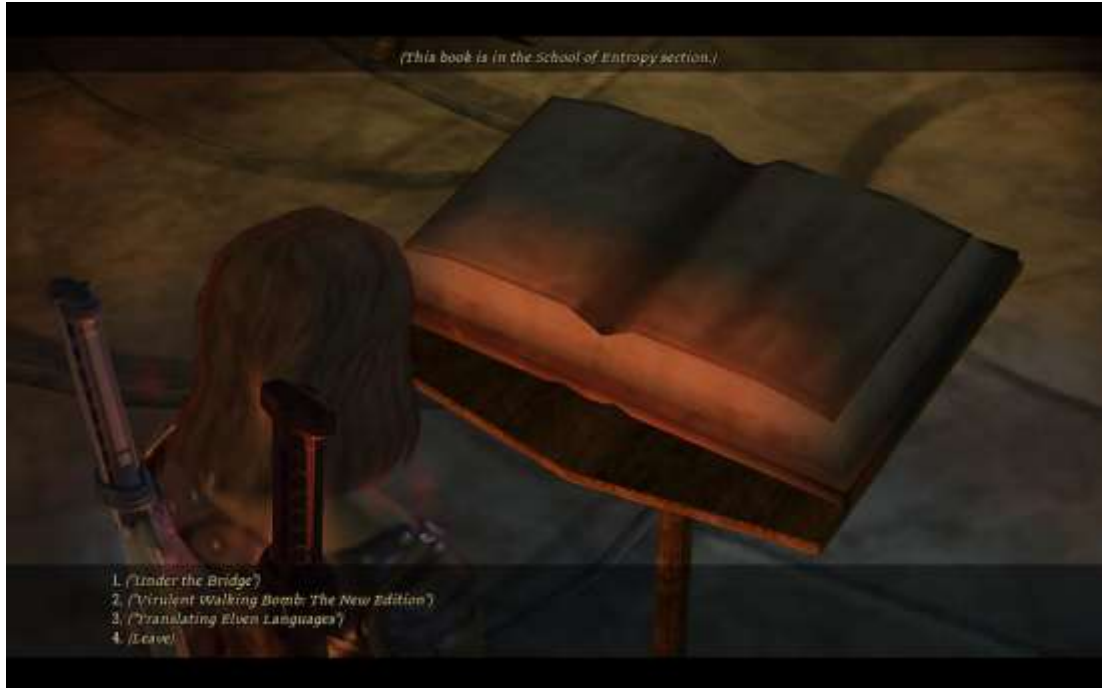


Figure 5 – Searching through books



Figure 6 – “Purification” (source: see Bibliography)

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