



**GAME NARRATIVE**  
SUMMIT

# Building to an Emotional Theme

**Patrick Weekes**

Lead Writer  
BioWare Edmonton

**John Epler**

Narrative Presentation Lead  
BioWare Edmonton



**GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE** March 14-18, 2016 · Expo: March 16-18, 2016 #GDC16



# Who are we?

- Patrick Weekes – Lead Writer
  - BioWare since 2005
- John Epler – Narrative Presentation Lead
  - BioWare since 2007
- Patrick is what, John is how
- Requires both collaboration and iteration



# How Can We Help You?

- We make stories work
- We make people feel things
- We can show you how we do it







# Here's where we started from...

- You founded the Inquisition
- You became the Inquisitor
- You became a major world power



# Trespasser DLC: Goals

- Wrap up the Inquisitor's story
  - Conclusively tie off this protagonist
- Set up future of the franchise
  - Eluvians, Qunari, Ancient Elves
- Emotionally engage players
  - Give the feels



# Trespasser DLC: Results

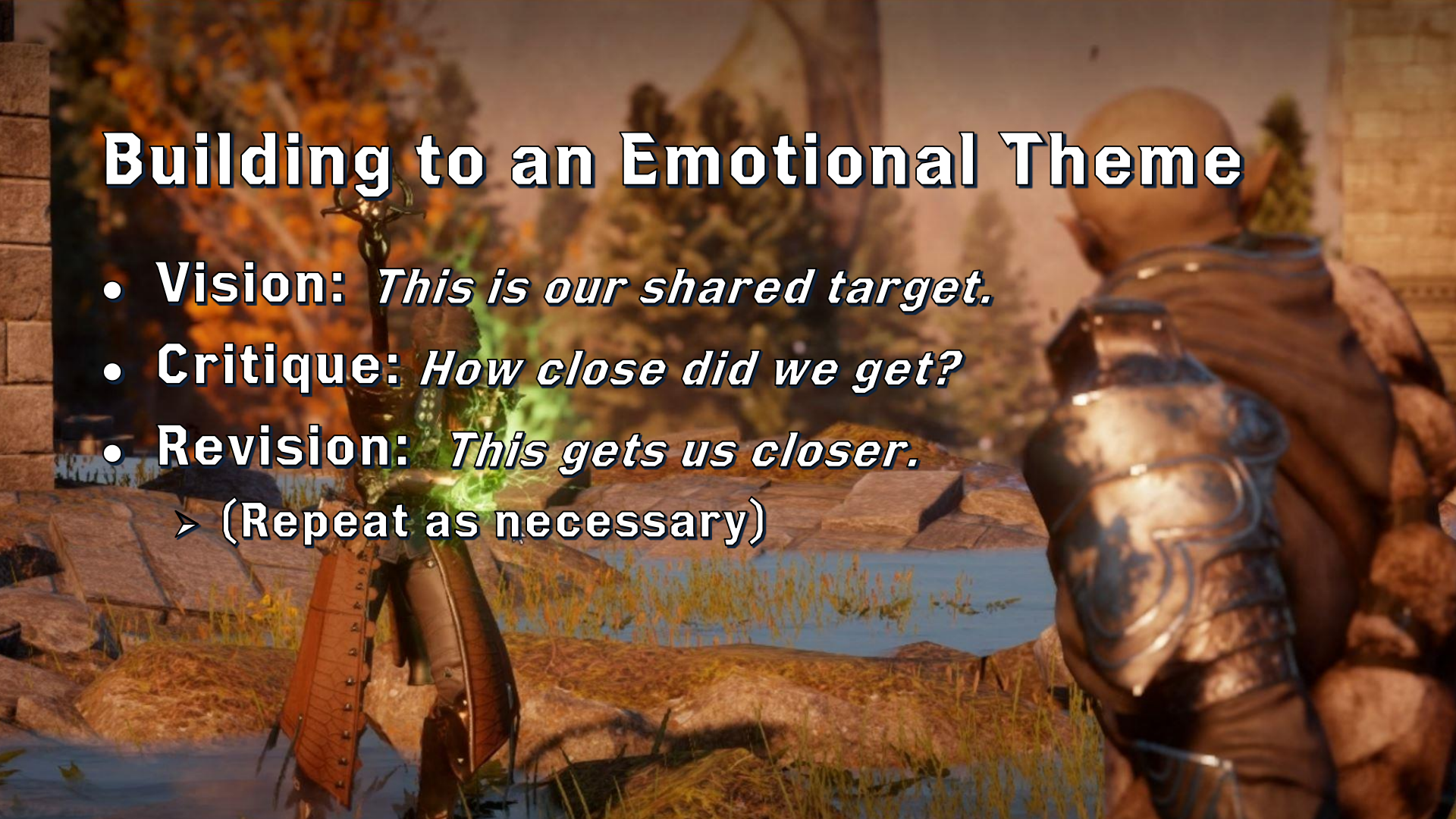
- “I thought the inquisition game itself was amazing, but with this ending... It's perfection!”
- “DA4 Now? NOW.”
- “Oh Maker..SO MANY FEELS.”

Source: r/DragonAge/



# Building to an Emotional Theme

- **Vision:** *This is our shared target.*
- **Critique:** *How close did we get?*
- **Revision:** *This gets us closer.*
  - (Repeat as necessary)



# Vision

Start with broad goals/emotions

Find appropriate references





# Broad Goals

- Learn truth about Solas
- Sense of wonder, melancholy
- Show Inquisition infiltrated
- Show that simple solutions... aren't



# Appropriate References

- Needs to be intuitive
- Needs to be inspirational
- “Good” is optional







# Reference

Truth Behind Mythology

+

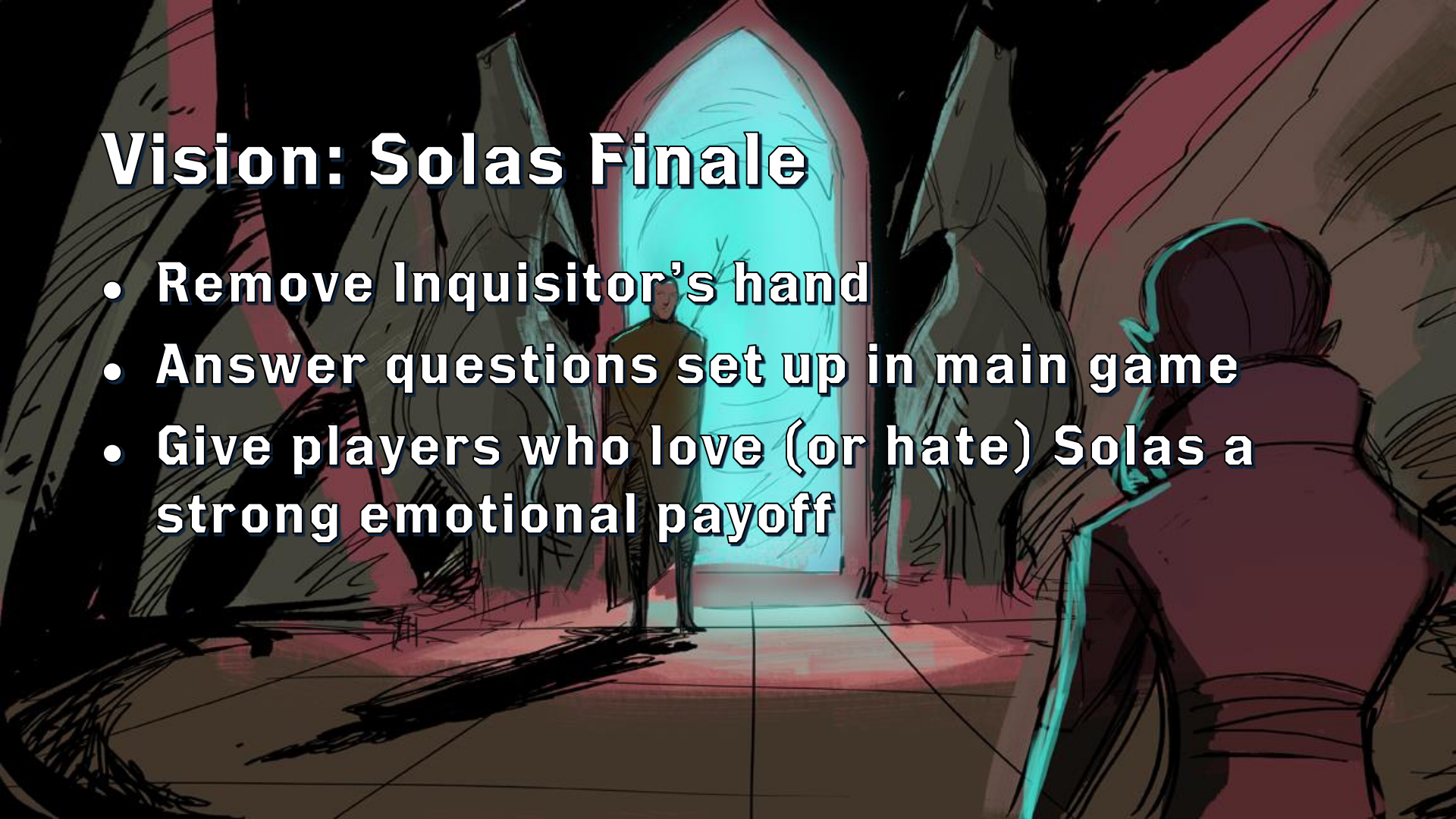
Organization Corrupted

“Raiders of the Lost Ark”  
meets “Captain America:  
Winter Soldier”



# Vision: Solas Finale

- Remove Inquisitor's hand
- Answer questions set up in main game
- Give players who love (or hate) Solas a strong emotional payoff

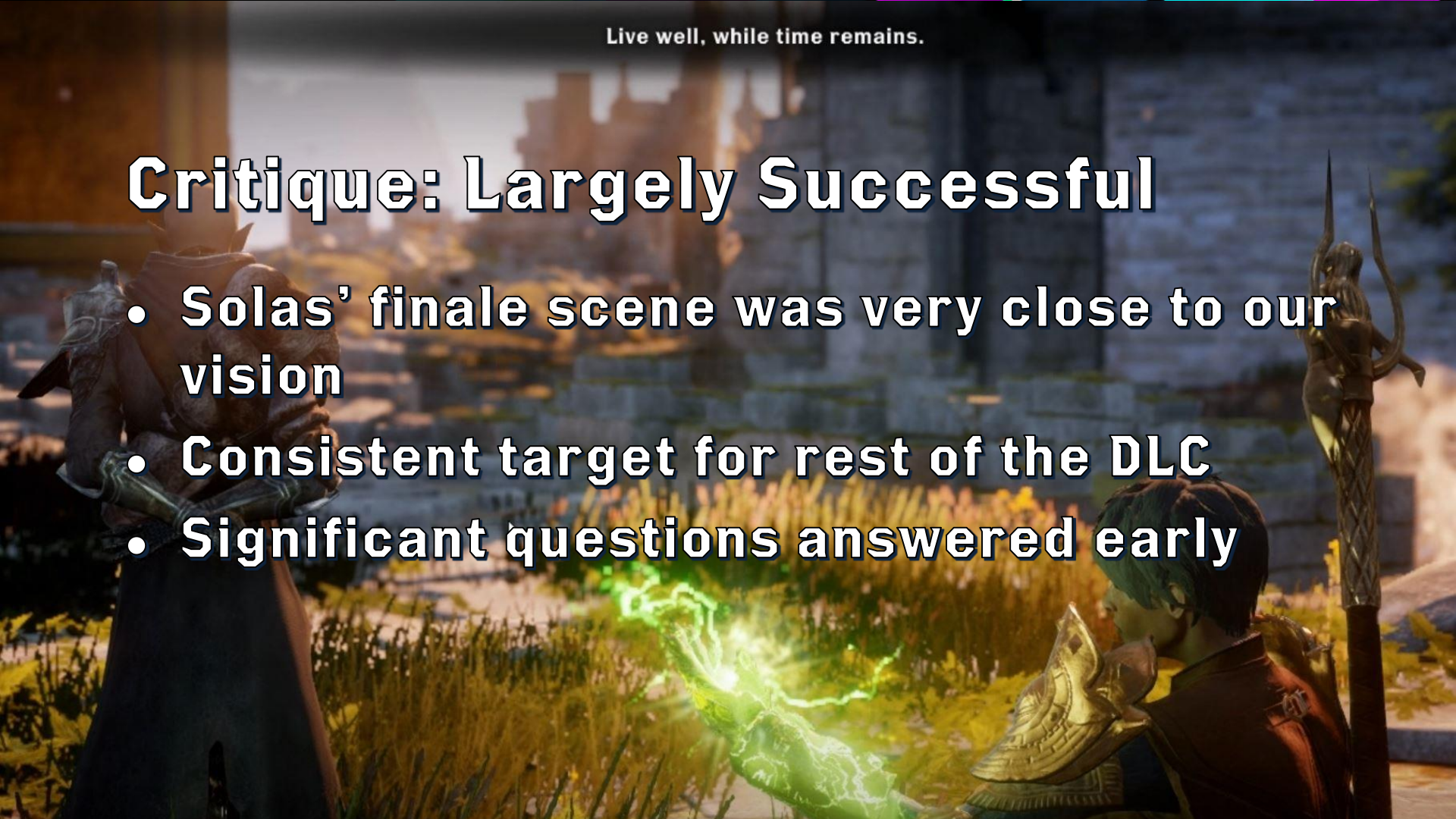




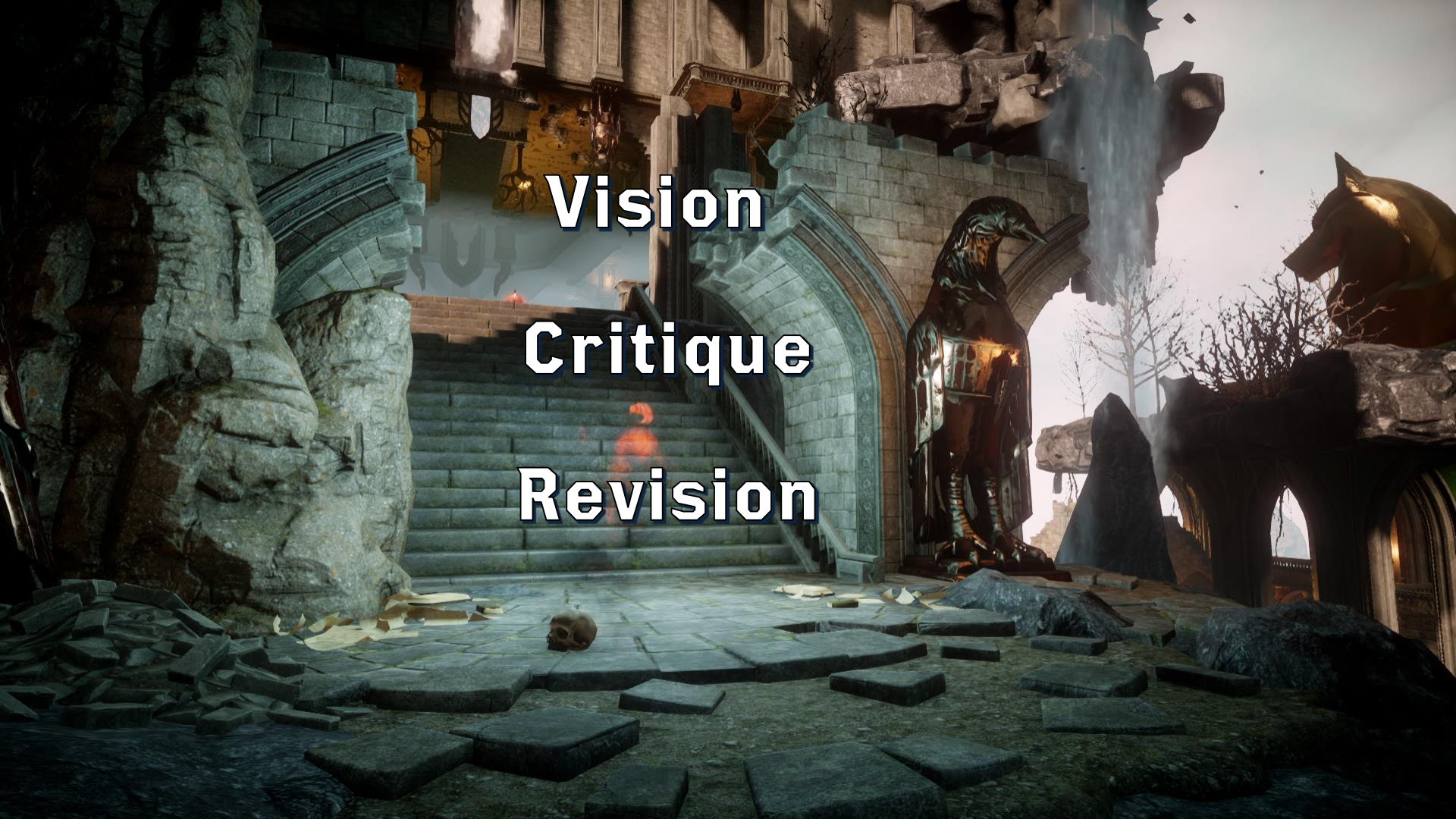
Live well, while time remains.

# Critique: Largely Successful

- Solas' finale scene was very close to our vision
- Consistent target for rest of the DLC
- Significant questions answered early





The background image is a dark, atmospheric scene of a ruined castle. It features stone arches, a large eagle statue, and a skull on the ground. The scene is dimly lit, with some light coming from the arches and the eagle statue. The overall mood is somber and mysterious.

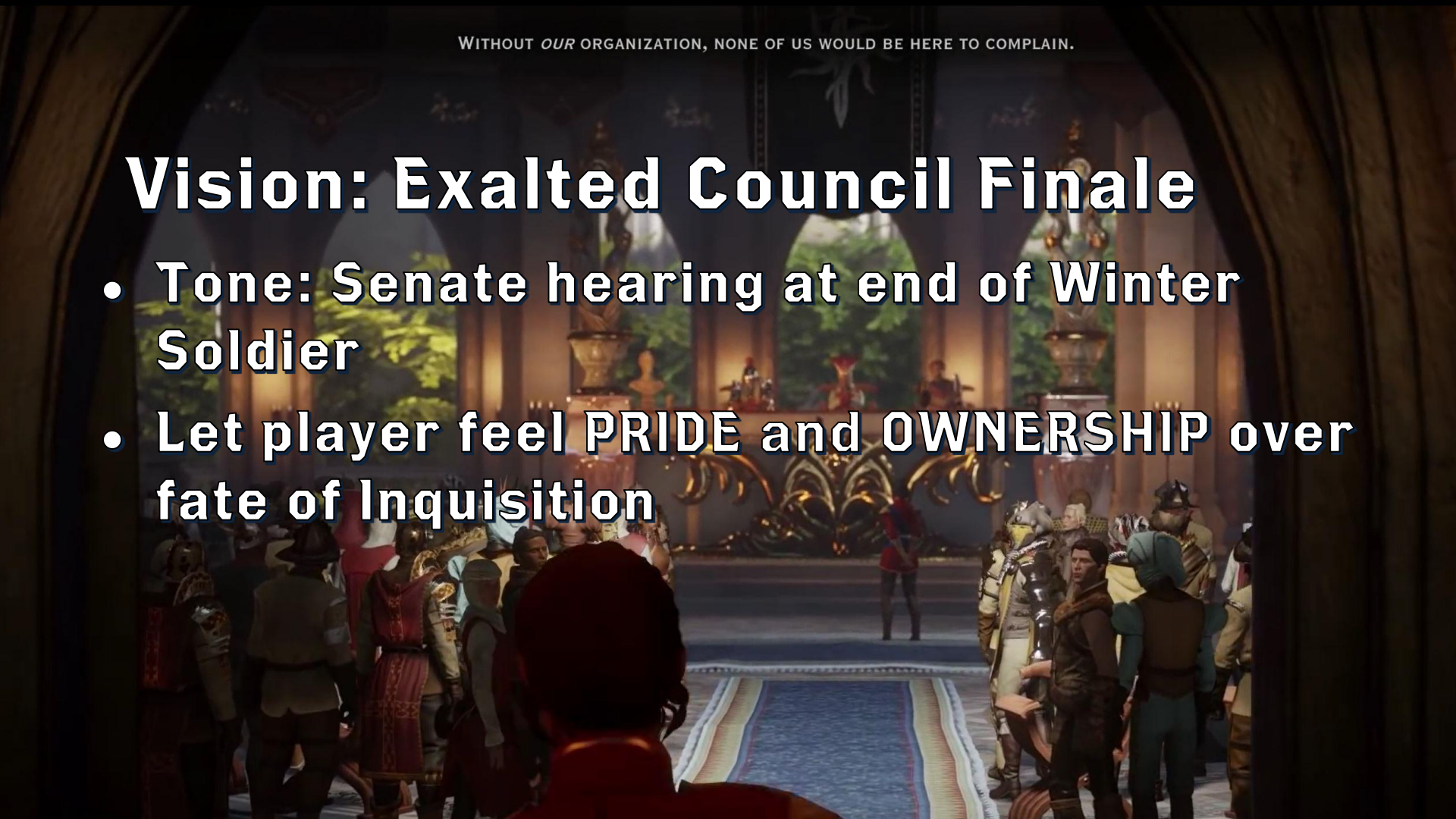
**Vision**  
**Critique**  
**Revision**



WITHOUT *OUR* ORGANIZATION, NONE OF US WOULD BE HERE TO COMPLAIN.

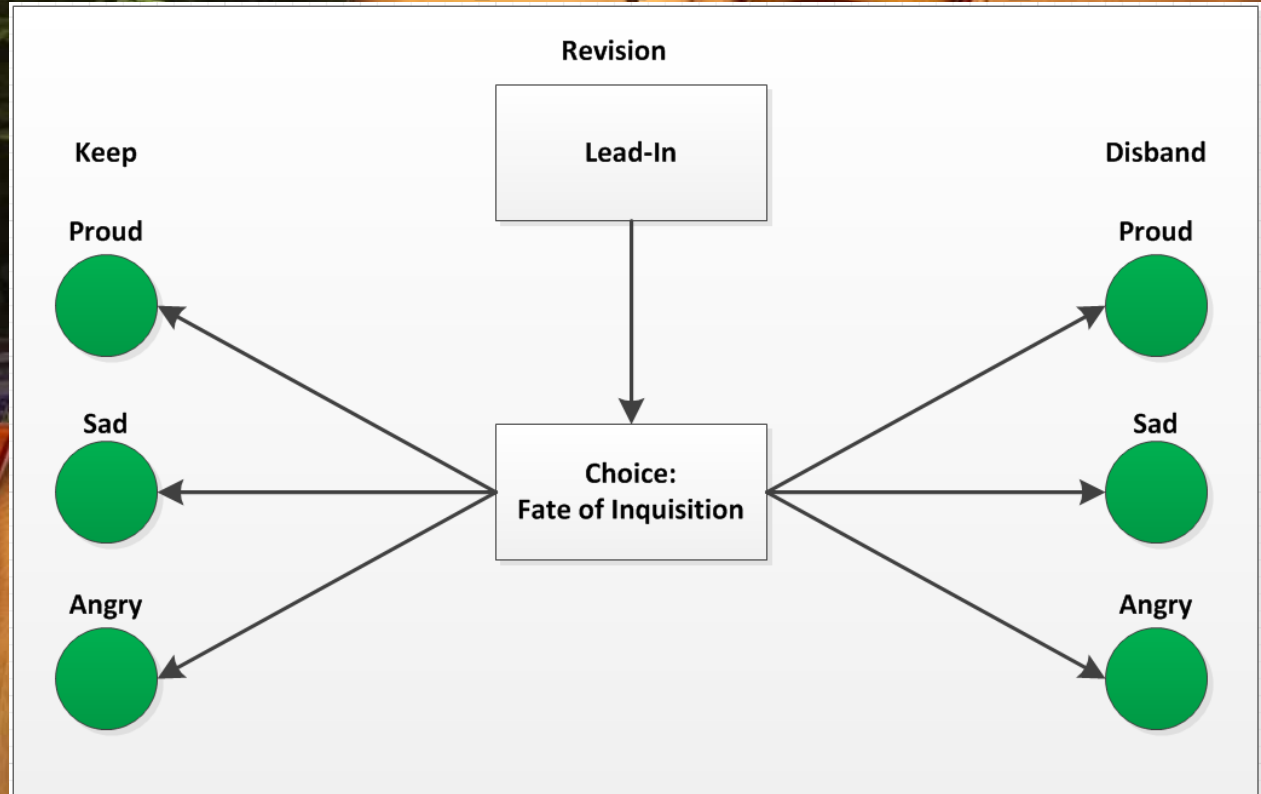
# Vision: Exalted Council Finale

- Tone: Senate hearing at end of Winter Soldier
- Let player feel **PRIDE** and **OWNERSHIP** over fate of Inquisition



# Critique I: Unsatisfying Writing

- Show choices
- Team rewrite





# Critique 2: Missing Links



- Teagan's arguments were petty
  - Going for justified concern – missed
- Competing threads of 'catch up with friends' and 'one last adventure'
  - Needed better connections between beats

INVADING UNDER PRETEXT OF RESTORING ORDER IS EXACTLY WHAT THE GREY WARDENS DID TO US CENTURIES AGO, AND WE EXILED THEM!

# Revision: Fill in the Blanks

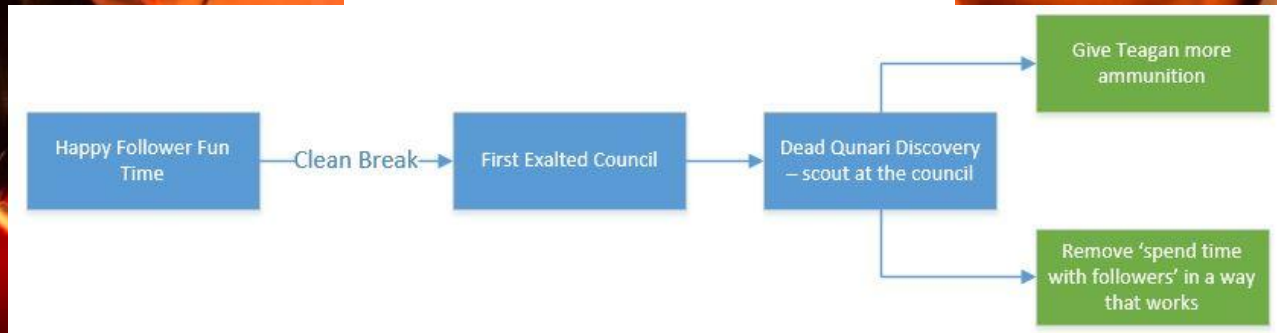
- Teagan given more screen time
- Goes from two moments...
- ... to five
- Justify his fears





# Revision: Fill in the Blanks

- Make the transition from 'fun time' to 'dire threat' cleaner. How?
- Tie the dead Qunari to the Exalted Council
- Side benefit – more justification for Teagan!



# **BONUS SLIDE - Extra opportunities**

- Solas' spy
- Wasn't planned - came up organically
- Strong vision presents opportunities





A detailed landscape image featuring a massive stone building with Gothic-style architecture perched on a steep, rocky cliff. A waterfall cascades down the cliff face. The foreground shows a stone wall and some foliage. The background consists of misty, mountainous terrain under a soft, hazy sky.

**Vision**

**Critique**

**Revision**

**Repeat as necessary**



# Vision: The Deep Roads

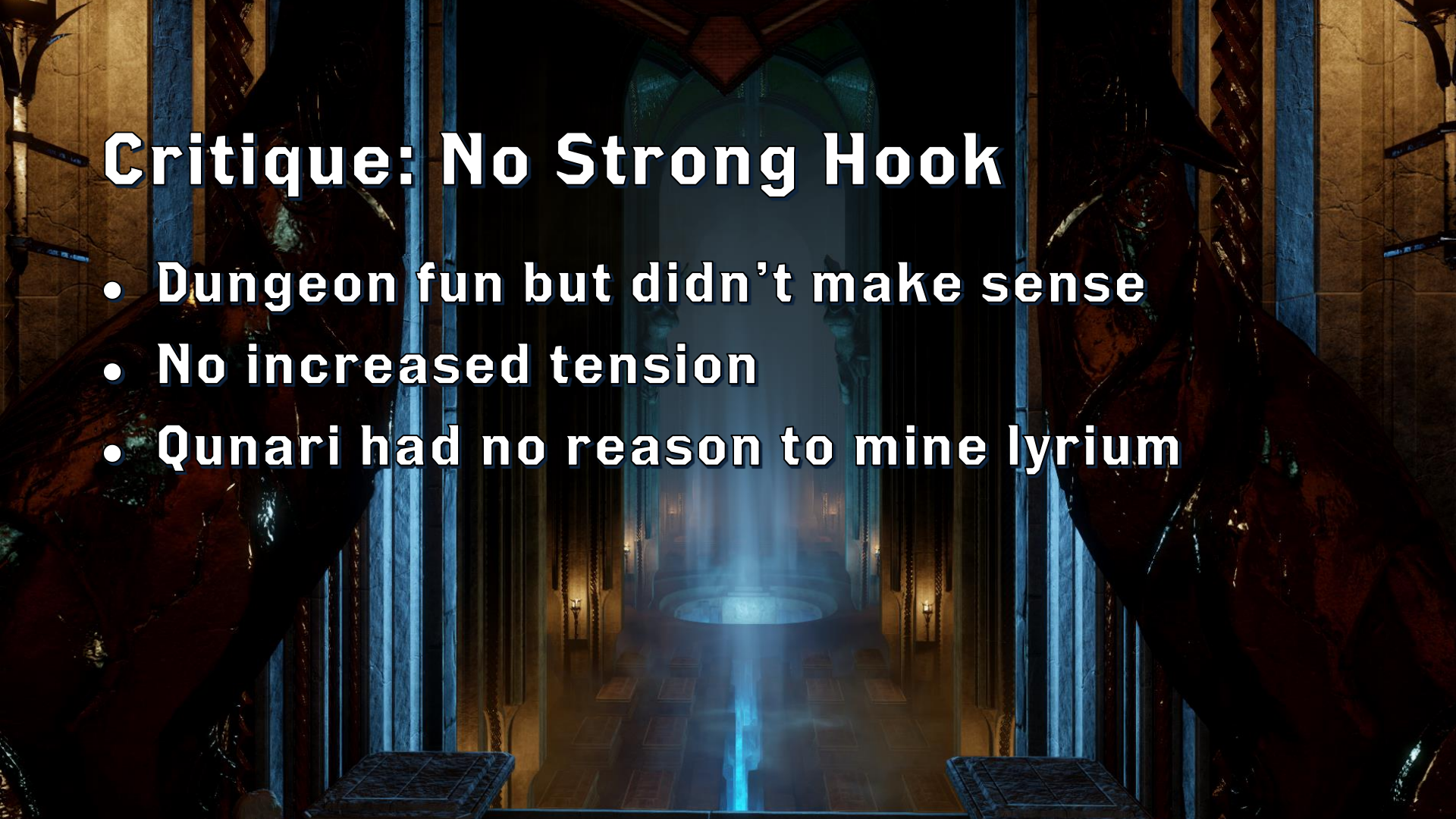
- Second dungeon, underground
- Establish Qunari threat, amp up tension
- Tie Qunari to Iyrium mining





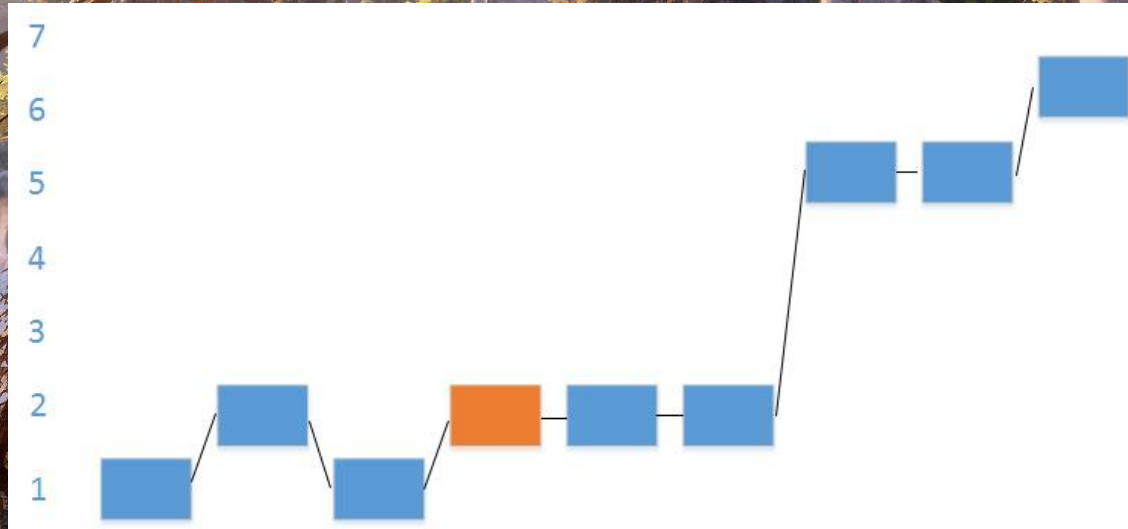
# Critique: No Strong Hook

- Dungeon fun but didn't make sense
- No increased tension
- Qunari had no reason to mine lyrium



# Tension Graphing

- We were missing intensity rise
- Needed Deep Roads to bring up baseline





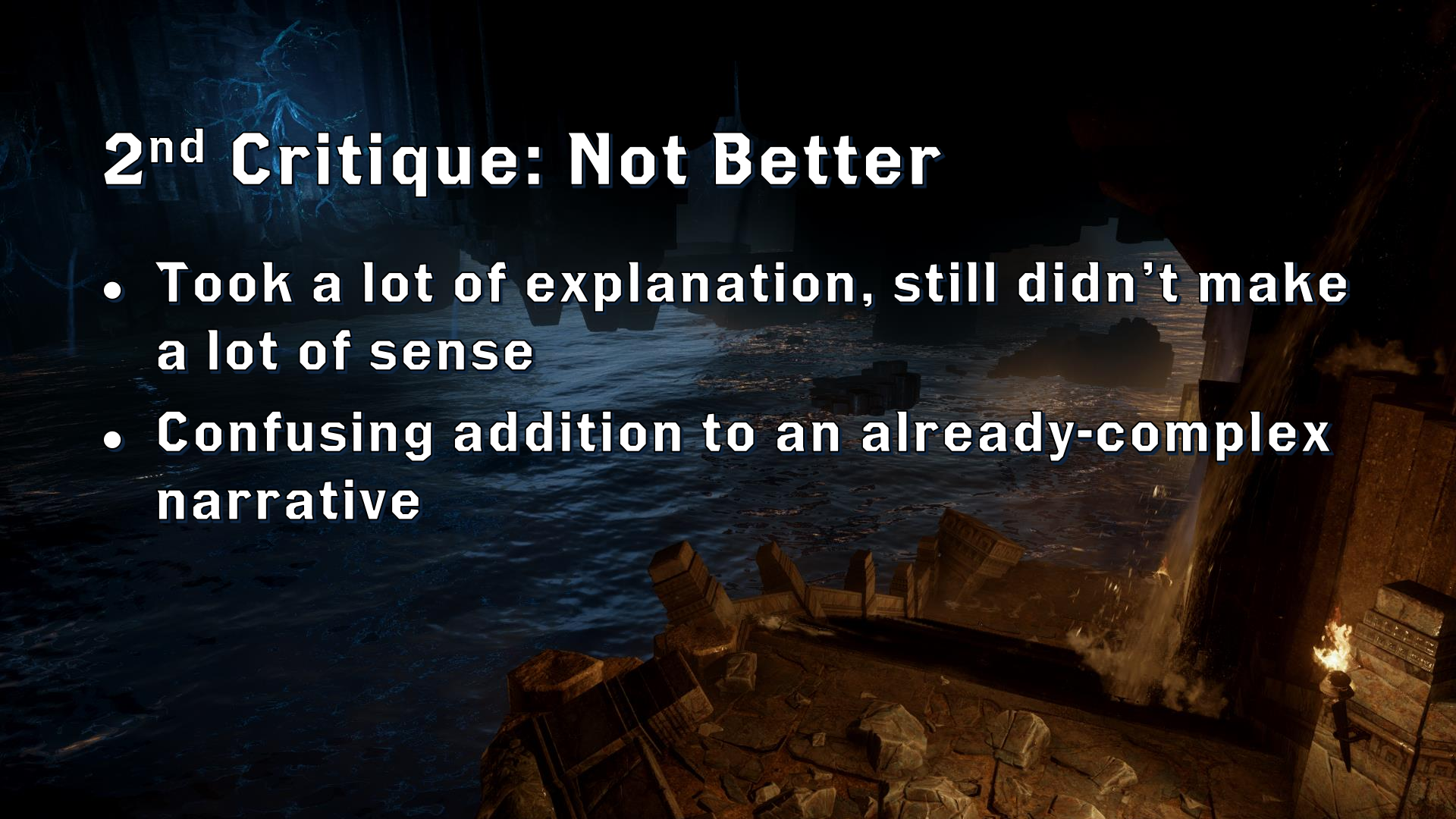
# Revision: Qunari Templars

- Qunari making templars to counter magic
- Qunari mine lyrium to make templars
- Added former templar



## 2<sup>nd</sup> Critique: Not Better

- Took a lot of explanation, still didn't make a lot of sense
- Confusing addition to an already-complex narrative





# Re-Revision: Super-Saarebas

- Lose Qunari templars
- Tie existing Saarebas to plot
- Lyrium explains power and danger





# Takeaways

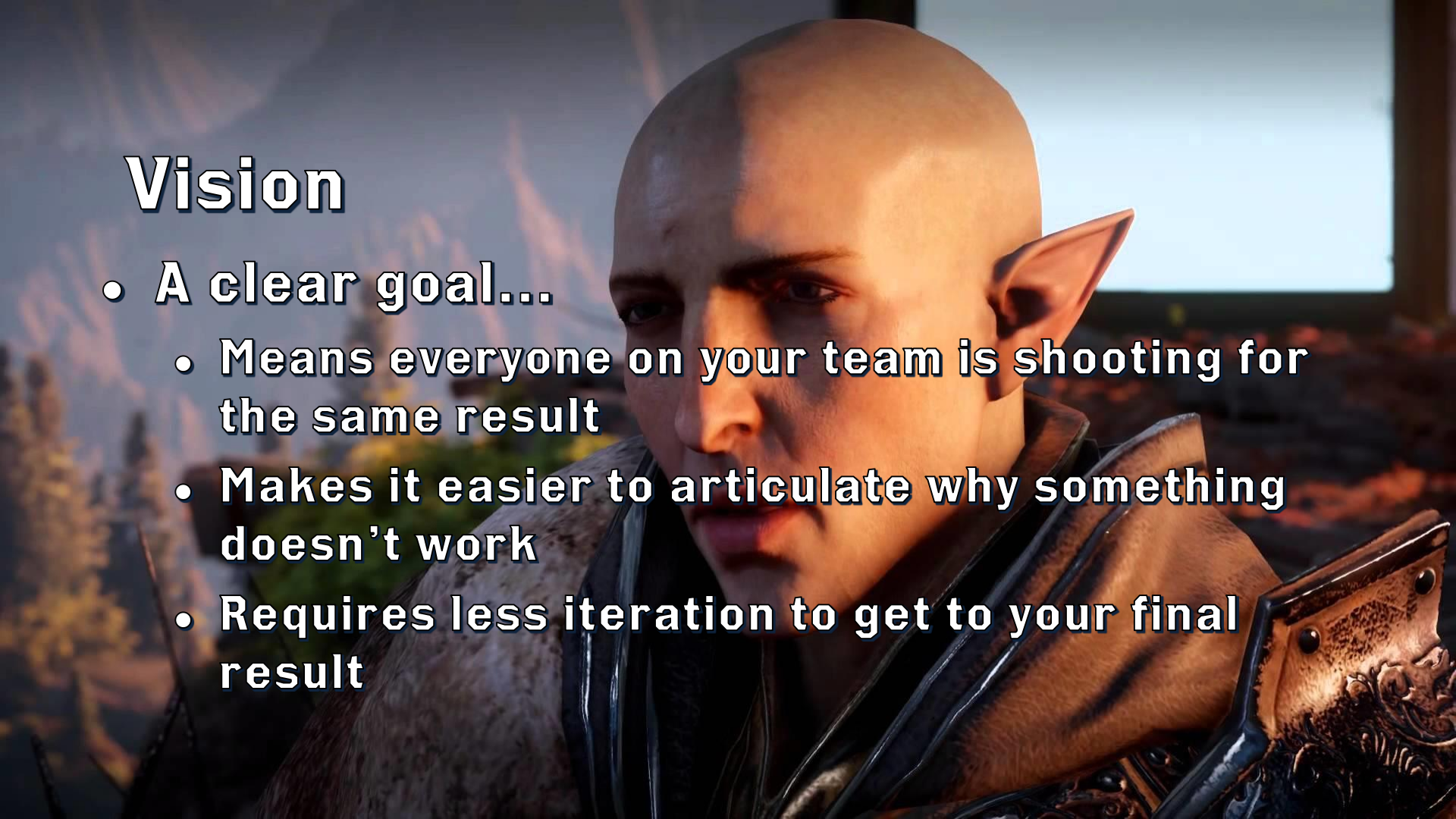
- Vision
- Critique
- Revision





# Vision

- A clear goal...
  - Means everyone on your team is shooting for the same result
  - Makes it easier to articulate why something doesn't work
  - Requires less iteration to get to your final result



# Critique

- Useful feedback...
  - Takes place in a secure, confident environment
  - Notes both problems and strong points that should be polished and protected.
  - Moves the project closer to the vision.





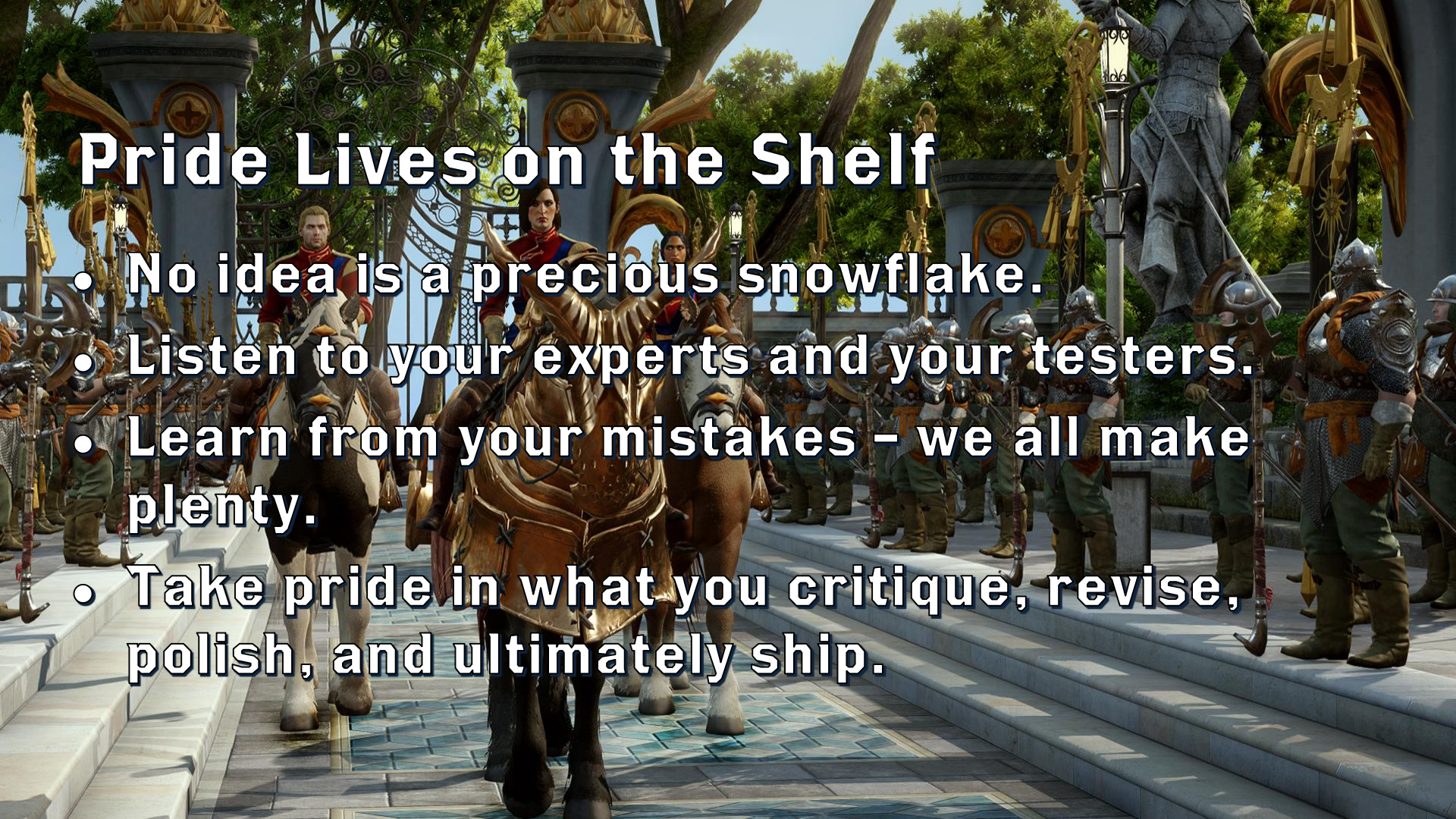
# Revision

- **Good iteration...**
  - Produces improvements within your scope and timeline.
  - Addresses specific concerns for a targeted result.
  - Can be tested and reversed if it does not make things better.



# Pride Lives on the Shelf

- No idea is a precious snowflake.
- Listen to your experts and your testers.
- Learn from your mistakes – we all make plenty.
- Take pride in what you critique, revise, polish, and ultimately ship.





THANK YOU, YOUR HOLINESS. NOW, ARL TEAGAN, AS TO YOUR CONCERNS...

# THANK YOU

- To our fellow developers, who pour their heart into the game
- To our families, who put up with it
- To our fans, who keep making this job worth it

# Other talks!

- Sebastian Hanlon, Lead Combat Designer - Getting Inquisitive About the AI of 'Dragon Age Inquisition' (Tuesday, Mar 15, 10AM – 134 North Hall)
- Karin Weekes, Lead Editor - IGDA Romance and Sexuality SIG Roundtable (Wednesday, Mar 16, 5PM – 111 North Hall)



A dramatic fantasy scene featuring a dragon-like creature with a blue and silver scale-like texture in the foreground, looking towards a bright, glowing light source. The background is filled with floating, jagged rock formations and islands under a hazy, greenish-yellow sky. Several tall, narrow, arched windows or portals are visible, emitting a blue light. The overall atmosphere is mystical and epic.

**Thank You for Coming!**



# Image citations

- **Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark fertility idol swap, Pop Critica**  
<http://pop-critica.com/disney-ceo-iger-confirms-indiana-jones-movie-is-coming/>,  
March 13 2016
- **"Marvel's Captain America: The Winter Soldier"..L to R: Black Widow/Natasha Romanoff (Scarlett Johansson) & Captain America/Steve Rogers (Chris Evans)..**  
**Cosmic Book News**  
<http://www.cosmicbooknews.com/sites/default/files/imagecache/node-gallery-display/captainamericaimagestill25.jpg> March 13 2016
- **Dead End Thrills, <http://deadendthrills.com/>, numerous DAI images**