

Historical Reflections on *Anna*: A Videogame that Highlights the Ancient Myths and Legends of the Val d’Ayas

David Walter Leinweber
Associate Professor of History
Oxford College of Emory University
Oxford, GA 30054
USA



Figure 1 The actual sawmill featured in Anna, situated just outside of Champoluc in the Val d’Ayas. Note the clear-running stream.

Released in 2012 by Dreampainters Software, the video game *Anna* highlights the myths and legends of the Val d’Ayas, in the Aosta Valley of the Italian Alps. The game takes place entirely in a sawmill just outside of Champoluc, the largest of the towns dotting this rugged mountainous terrain. The game features a murky story where a man with amnesia finds himself at the sawmill. Entering, the player finds items and reading materials that shed light on the myths and legends of this small mountain hamlet. We also learn more about the story of “Anna,” a beautiful sacred being who has inhabited the site of the sawmill since pre-historic times. Anna has the effect of captivating men, dooming them to spend eternity with her. This essay provides some historical perspective on the myths and history highlighted in the game, as well as the nature of its mysterious figure, “Anna.”¹

While no blockbuster title, *Anna* highlights the important, and probably unappreciated, potential of video games to make significant contributions to popular culture.

¹ I owe special thanks to Hannah Bengtsson, Michel Becquet and Saverio Favre for their informative, helpful guidance during a recent visit to the Val d’Ayas. Their commentaries and perspectives helped make this essay possible. Also, the photographs that help illustrate the text are by the author. The pictures were laid-out in this draft manuscript according to the author’s best technical ability, as is obvious.

In its way, the game offers gamers a window into classical mythology, as well as themes of geography, folklore, and sacred myth.² Whatever its merits as a game, per se, *Anna* does provide an example of how video games can potentially provide educational enrichment, along with puzzles, exploration, and interesting little dramas. As Martin Wainwright noted in his 2014 article “Teaching Historical Theory through Video Games,” video games have already shown an ability to teach historical concepts of sorts, especially in grand-scale games like the popular series *Civilization*, *Age of Empires*, *Europa Universalis*, or *Assassin’s Creed*, among others.³ As Wainwright notes, however, many of these games have tended to approach history on the grand scale, something akin to historians like Arnold Toynbee’s famous macro theorizing. *Anna* offers a different approach to history in video games – a little setting, a remote world, and a complex blend of folklore and local lore, all connected to bigger themes of interest to students of history, myth, and geography. Attentive gamers playing *Anna* will learn much about one of the most remote and rugged areas of Europe, past and present. The game also connects the details of its local setting to bigger concepts, especially in areas like myth, religion, and the sacred feminine.



Figure 2 Entering Champoluc in the Val d'Ayas.

The Val d’Ayas where *Anna* takes place would seem a perfect locale for breeding folklore with a rich local heritage of culture and storytelling – a seedbed of legends and popular traditions.⁴ The mountainous geography of the Aosta Valley means that languages and culture often remained localized. In the Middle Ages, the population of the Aosta Valley was no more Italian than French. Instead, they spoke one of the scores of Romantic dialects that flourished all over Latin Europe, *valdôtain*. While the population speaks Italian today, most of the natives speak French relatively well, the result of schooling, as well as the influence of nearby France.

Anna highlights the hard nature of living in a forested mountain area, especially for those hiking on foot. Though most of the game is spent inside the claustrophobic confines of the sawmill, *Anna*’s designers still sought to remind gamers of the mountainous geography in which the game is set. *Anna* especially highlights Castor and Pollux, the twin peaks that loom over the Val d’Ayas.⁵ In the game, a vintage postcard like image of the mountain peaks magically appear on the sawmill’s old walls, highlighting the rugged geography that surrounds the protagonist. Such imposing mountains loom majestically, and ominously, over the quiet of the sawmill’s repose. Further emphasizing the difficult nature of walking in the Aosta Valley, the character in *Anna* had hurt his leg trekking on the rugged terrain in the valley. This injury is the event that resulted in his enchantment with Anna.

² Paul Christesen and Dominic Machado, “Video Games and Classical Antiquity,” in *The Classical World*, FALL 2010, Vol. 104, No. 1 (FALL 2010), pp. 107-110.

³ A. Martin Wainwright, Teaching Historical Theory through Video Games, *The History Teacher*, August 2014, Vol. 47, No. 4 (August 2014), pp. 579-612.

⁴ Tersilla Gatto Chanu, *Leggende e Racconti Popolari della Valle d’Aosta* (Rome, Italy: Newton Compton Editori, 2017), pg. 7.

⁵ Augusta Vittoria Cerutti, “Paesaggio e suoi fattori,” in *La Terra Degli Challant: Genti e Paesi della Comunità Montana dell’Evançon*, edited by Saverio Favre and Daniele Vicquère (Turin, Italy: Comunità Montana Evançon, 1998), 7-8. 3-42.

He stayed for a time with Anna as she healed his leg. The protagonist's injury to his leg highlights how for thousands of years, a culture of hiking and journeying in the jagged mountain slopes fostered a hardy people, accustomed to walking large distances over treacherous and often uneven inclines. Many locals use the "*bastone*," or "walking-stick" to gain additional balance and support. Because of the arduous nature of walking – an essential feature of everyday life – Roman Catholic shrines in the area often doubled as little rest stops and landmarks for better orientation. Most shrines featured a step or seat of some kind, making them double as benches. As well as offering a geographical landmark, such little pathway shrines provided a brief respite for the feet before renewing the journey.



Figure 3 A roadside shrine to the Virgin Mary in the Val d'Ayas. Note the little bench at the front of the shrine, offering weary travelers respite.

Along with the rugged and wild mountainous terrain, the game *Anna* also highlights the importance of wood as a staple item in the lives of the inhabitants of the Val d'Ayas. Today, the nineteenth century sawmill stands in ruins, its decrepit state adding to the horror of the interior. The date on the main beam above the sawmill door reads 1861. (A largely unused cell phone in the game's inventory items gives one of the only clues that we are in the twenty-first century.) The game being set in a sawmill, the forest setting around Champoluc provides an obvious setting to emphasize Champoluc's woodworking, in all its facets. Wood from area trees is one of the most basic building materials in the area, an essential component of everything from buildings, to everyday items, to the finest crafts and arts. The larch is one of the most favored and familiar types of trees in Alps, giving its conifer wood for many different purposes from ancient times to the present.⁶ The sawmill itself borrows from the "Rascard" style of architecture popular in the valley. Rascard architecture combines wood and stone elements. This type of architecture, with its varying specific characteristics, is defined as a "rustic structure made of wood."⁷ Rascard architectural influence is loosely popular to many readers due to the enduring story of *Heidi* and the Alps' touristy association with chalets, shops and lodgings.

⁶ Roger B. Ulrich, *Roman Woodworking* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2007), pg. 268.

⁷ Roland Bauer, "*Vallée d'Aoste*," in *Manuel des Francophonies*, edited by Ursula Reutner (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2017), pg. 267.



Figure 4 The sawmill as it appears in *Anna*. Note the waterwheel at its side.

As unassuming as it might seem at first glance, the sawmill featured in *Anna* is situated upon a site that recalls some of the most important linkages between the geography of the Val d’Ayas, and its rich history of myth and folklore. Upon reflection, we can see how this quiet little clearing in the rugged mountains must have proved attractive to people, century after century. Situated near forests, as well as a lovely little clear running brook, the very same qualities that once made it such an attractive site for ancient forest worshippers similarly made it an ideal location for a sawmill in the heart of the Val d’Ayas lumber trade. The place provided access to wood, clear water, and close proximity to a well-travelled path that naturally circled the otherwise treacherous mountain terrain. It is a beautiful spot, a calm oasis of greenery surrounded by breathtaking views. In ancient times, it would have made an ideal location to imagine that a forest deity dwelled. In later ages, these very same geographical advantages made it suitable for those interested in trade and commerce. For these reasons, the nineteenth century builders of the sawmill placed their structure directly on top of Anna’s ancient sacred dwelling place. But by inadvertently locating their sawmill directly on top of Anna’s divine abode, nineteenth century builders set the stage for a strange intermingling of pre-industrial timber working and ancient mythic beliefs. Unbeknownst to Modern inhabitants of Champoluc, the sawmill grounds hide all the ancient vestiges of the natural forest setting that once hosted pagan worship: a “sacred grove,” a clear stream, a pool, and a dark cave, where we find the goddess at the end of the game. As gamers explore the present-day sawmill, the ancient mysteries of the site gradually unfold.

Perhaps one of the most telling characteristics of the setting of the sawmill in *Anna* has to do with its forested sacred grove. For Antiquarians, the “sacred grove” has almost become a cliché. Yet it reflected a very real tendency of early peoples to seek out the natural clearings in forested areas. With its emphasis on trees and the forest, the game *Anna* naturally highlights the significance of wood, with all its myriad uses, in the Val d’Ayas. For people living before the Industrial Revolution, a sawmill like the one featured in the game was an unsung necessity of everyday life. It provided essential lumber for all kinds of needs and wants. Over time, the people of the Val d’Ayas produced some of Europe’s finest crafted items from wood. Artisans in the Aosta Valley excelled at woodworking and carpentry. Their capable, skilled craftwork ran the gamut from everyday objects and tools to the finest artistry of woodcraft. Numerous place names in towns adjacent to Champoluc recall the importance of wood in the region, especially the old town of Antagnod. The name “Antagnod” comes from the term “*Ante Lignum*, before the wood.”⁸ The Aosta town of Lignod also retains this allusion to wood in its name. Antagnod today still evidences the splendid traditions of carpentry and woodcarving in the Val d’Ayas. The somewhat unlikely little Antagnod Church of Saint Martin features one of the most impressive baroque altars in Europe, superb woodworking artisanship highlighted in a remote little town that some might find otherwise unassuming.

⁸ Saverio Favre, “Toponomastia,” in *La Terra Degli Challant: Genti e Paesi della Comunità Montana dell’Evançon*, edited by Saverio Favre and Daniele Vicquère (Turin, Italy: Comunità Montana Evançon, 1998), pgs. 123-54.



Figure 5 The fine baroque altar at the Church of Saint Martin in Antagnod, adjacent to Champoluc. Though a small mountain town, Antagnod features some of the finest woodworking traditions in Europe.

One especially iconic specimen of Val d'Ayas folk woodworking culture featured in *Anna* comes from the popular “*grolla*” drinking cup. The *grolla* is a community cup. Multiple spouts for drinking bored into the side of the *grolla* enabled communal imbibing with straws. In the game, the player must perform a magic ritual involving a *grolla* in order to advance the story, leading up to the final encounter with Anna in the cave below the sawmill. The *grolla* in *Anna* appears in a little pagan sacred circle we find in Anna’s “Temple” below the sawmill. The site hosted rituals dedicated to Anna in ancient times. Standing stones surround the circle, with the *grolla* featured as the site’s centerpiece. Greenery and forest ambiance make the little sacred grove site a welcome departure from the sawmill’s grim horrific atmosphere hovering above the ancient green space, so long hidden away. The *grolla*’s appearance in this charming pagan setting evokes many powerful themes about the power of drinking vessels. In many pagan cultures, including Celtic ones like those of the ancient Salassian inhabitants of Aosta, numerous beliefs equated magical or sacred properties with vessels used for eating and drinking.⁹ These ancient beliefs were vaguely Christianized in the Middle Ages, giving rise to a fascinating though not always theologically coherent mix of folklore, religion, and mythology. Such practices seemed to blend traditional community festivities with a Catholic emphasis on the Eucharist, or even the Holy Grail.¹⁰

⁹ Juliette Wood, *The Holy Grail: History and Legend* (Cardiff, Wales: The University of Wales Press, 2012), pg. 47.

¹⁰ *Golden Bough of the Aosta Valley: Wood and Stone Sculptures* (Aosta, Italy: Pheljna, Edizione d'Arte e Suggestione, 1988), pg. 24.



Figure 6A grolla in present-day Champoluc.

Another popular feature of woodworking in the Val d'Ayas highlighted in *Anna* involves the “sabot,” the wooden shoes worn by inhabitants for centuries. *Sabots* were popular until the advent of the Industrial Revolution. They resemble the wooden shoes more popularly associated with the Dutch. But beyond the Low Countries, *sabots* featured prominently in everyday life in many other forested areas of Europe, notably France. Wooden shoes often protected the feet better than most alternatives. For centuries, French people in the Alps (and the Aosta Valley was as “French” as it was “Italian”) preferred wooden shoes to leather ones. Wooden shoes kept the feet drier in a climate that often featured rain and snow, as well as mud.¹¹ As recently as the Crimean War, some French soldiers wore *sabots* in the field, reportedly making them less susceptible to foot diseases and infections than soldiers wearing leather shoes.¹² During the First World War, wooden shoes like the *sabot* even enjoyed a brief revival of popularity, as war conditions made the leather market expensive and uncertain.¹³ Wooden shoes are also inexpensive to make. Once made, they require little maintenance such as polishing or re-stitching.¹⁴ *Anna* features the custom of making *sabot* shoes prominently. The sawmill made *sabots*, among other wooden items. *Anna* features tables and table-saws used to make the sabot. The old wooden shoes are strewn liberally throughout the game, sometimes as important inventory items, and often simply as details of the setting. In the real-life sawmill, the table that once made *sabots* remains visible through the window of the wrecked building today, a detail that game designers replicated.

¹¹ “How Wooden Shoes are Made,” in *Scientific American*, Vol. 40, No. 10 (MARCH 8, 1879), p. 150.

¹² “Wooden-soled Boots and Shoes — A New Article of Manufacture,” in *Scientific American*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (JANUARY 5, 1861), p. 10.

¹³ “Are Wooden Shoes Coming into Vogue Again,?” in *Scientific American*, Vol. 116, No. 14 (April 7, 1917), p. 349.

¹⁴ John A. Wallace, “Put Away Those Wooden Shoes!,” in *The Journal of Education* Vol. 136, No. 5 (February 1954), pp. 133-134, pg. 133.



Figure 7 In Antagnod, Michel Becquet demonstrates the ancient art of making sabots, the wooden shoes popular in the Val d'Ayas until the Industrial Revolution.



Figure 8A table-saw in the sawmill outside Champoluc, visible through the window still today.

Along with the *grolla* and the *sabot*, *Anna* also features another woodworking tradition of the Val d'Ayas, that of the mask. In the game, the player must discover numerous wooden masks to advance the tale. Some masks appear as anthropomorphic animals. Their shaggy faces highlight menacing canine incisors. Each mask has specific magical powers associated with the face they depict. Masks magically enable the player to see lost items in the sawmill, otherwise hidden from natural eyesight. One of the most important masks in the game is the "Mask of the Goddess," donned by one of *Anna*'s devotees, turned into a stone worshipper. The tradition of mask carving in *Anna* harkens back to ancient times in the Val d'Ayas, as in much of Italy. Still today, masks appear prominently in such Latin traditions as carnival, or operas. Masks also appear throughout the artwork of the Aosta region, ranging from cathedrals to the décor of pubs or town halls.¹⁵ In traditions such as theater or singing, artists have used masks not only to evoke the muse, but also as a way of accentuating the resonance of the voice, or even physical movement in general.¹⁶

¹⁵ Guido Guissard, "Maschera e teste apotropaiche in Valle d'Aosta, in in *La Terra Degli Challant: Genti e Paesi della Comunità Montana dell'Evançon*, edited by Saverio Favre and Daniele Vicquère (Turin, Italy: Comunità Montana Evançon, 1998), 81-105.

¹⁶ Torbjörn Alström, "The Voice in the Mask," in *TDR* (i.e. *The Drama Review*) (1988-) Vol. 48, No. 2 (Summer, 2004), pp. 133-138, pg. 134.

In ancient cult rituals around the Mediterranean World, magical beliefs involved wearing masks to take on the personas of gods, heroes, or animals they desired to hunt.¹⁷ As theater traditions evolved, actors donned masks to facilitate literal possession of their bodies by the divine beings and mythic heroes they portrayed.¹⁸

The game's important emphasis on the geography of the Val d' Ayas complements its overall focus on the sacred person of "Anna." While many questions remain, the little snippets of conversations and found items in the game help highlight some aspects of Anna's sacred persona. She definitely is some sort of a supernatural being. She also appears as a beautiful and enchanting young woman. Whoever Anna is, she has been on the site there by the sawmill since before civilization itself existed, perhaps even since the dawn of time. Anna seems like an elemental "Earth Mother" figure, the type found so often in pre-historic cultures throughout the ancient Mediterranean and Europe, and, indeed, the world. The sawmill itself is full of hints that Anna may be the historic "Earth Mother." It hints that Anna is really the Earth Mother, surviving in the present-age in her ancient abode, hidden beneath the sawmill. In one part of the game, the protagonist finds pre-historic "Venuses" in the storeroom. Breaking open one to find a pearl needed to advance in the game unlocks an achievement not entirely incorrectly called "Archaeology Sucks." Later, as the players near the end of the game finding Anna's sacred grotto, another display of pre-historic Earth Mother figurines also appears.



Figure 9 A display of "Earth Mother" figurines in Anna's cave at the end of the game.

Another ancient Earth Mother symbol highlighted in *Anna* is the *mandorla*, made from the intersection of circles forming an ovular shape that some have likened to female genitalia. In the *Journal* that gamers can read while playing, an early entry recounts how the protagonist – apparently a schoolteacher – explained to his students about the association of the *mandorla* with ancient fertility religions and the goddess, including Isis. Later in *Anna*, a "mandorla" symbol appears on the wall of the sawmill. Overall, the *mandorla* shape appeared prominently in ancient culture, associated with the mystical geometry of figures such as Pythagoras, or the ancient Egyptian knowledge with which the Pythagoreans were associated.¹⁹ The *mandorla* also appeared widely shield in imagery used in Greco-Roman décor, notably on sarcophagi.²⁰ Today, the geometric shapes associated with the *mandorla* are closely associated with lens-grinding, though it also still appears prominently in sacred art. In the Middle Ages people also called the sacred shape the called *mandorla*.

¹⁷ Maria G. Spathi, "Representations of masked figures: a comparative study and an interpretative approach to their cult-use and meaning," in *Popular Religion and Ritual in Prehistoric and Ancient Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean*, edited by Giorgos Vavouranakis, Konstantinos Kopanias, and Chrysanthos Kanellopoulos (Oxford, The United Kingdom: Archaeopress, 2018), pgs. 143-56, pg. 150.

¹⁸ Graham Wheeler, "Sing, Muse ...: The Introit from Homer to Apollonius," in *The Classical Quarterly* Vol. 52, No. 1 (2002), pp. 33-49, pg. 33.

¹⁹ Ron Lancaster, Jim Sandefur and Marshall Lassak, "Mathematical Lens," in *The Mathematics Teacher* Vol. 99, No. 7 (MARCH 2006), pp. 512-515, pg. 512.

²⁰G. W. Elderkin, "Shield and Mandorla," in *American Journal of Archaeology* Vol. 42, No. 2 (Apr. - Jun., 1938), pp. 227-236, pg. 233.

They sometimes used it as an aureole to frame holy icons. Today, the hint of a *mandorla* appears sometimes as the sacred aura/aureole surrounding saints, like in the famous image of the Virgin Mary of Guadeloupe.²¹ The term “*Vesica Piscis*” is another familiar term for the *mandorla*, taken from the Latin “*vesica*,” which means “vulva,” and “*piscis*,” which means “fish.” In pagan religions, these sexual symbols closely related to the “female principle of nature,” especially in the guise of goddesses like Isis, Venus, Ceres, or Diana. Scholars also have noted that the shape resembles that of an almond.²²



Figure 10 The “*mandorla*” as it appears in Anna on the walls of the sawmill. The ancient fertility symbol resulted from the intersected area between two circular shapes.

Another important linkage between Anna and the pre-historic Earth Mother being appears in the several instances of ‘standing stones’ found in the game. There are standing stones found in Anna’s little forest grove, hidden beneath the sawmill. *Anna* also has a classic circle of standing stones found before the entrance to Anna’s grotto, in the cave passages found below the sawmill at the end of the game. From the Bible, where the Children of Israel placed stones all throughout their long Exodus, to the ancient cultures of the Mediterranean and Europe, the seeming permanence and gravity of stones made them especially associated with long-term things like law and religion.²³



Figure 11A circle of standing stones found beneath the sawmill, at the entrance to Anna’s sacred grotto.

The Aosta Valley is one of the many areas where excavations have found standing stones. The most famous site of standing stones is in the city of Aosta, the site of San Martin des Corléans. Here, in 1969, workers found a large complex of standing stones during the digging of a condominium.

²¹ Marie-Theresa Hernandez, *The Virgin of Guadalupe and the Conversos: Uncovering Hidden Influences from Spain to Mexico* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2014), pg. 65.

²² Ana Riutort, *Arte antiguo* (Firmas Press, 2001), pg. 135.

²³ Theodore Ziolkowski, “Talking Statues?,” in *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 110, No. 4 (October 2015), pp. 946-968, pg. 946.

The site revealed several pre-historic artifacts dating back as far as 5000 B.C., including numerous “megalithic” monuments. The standing stones like those at Saint Martin de Corléans doubled as stelae, with carved designs. They also marked the tombs of important persons. They often included carvings that, while hard to decipher, seem to indicate clothing – belts, jewelry, and vaguely human shapes.²⁴



Figure 12A standing stone at Saint Martin de Corléans in Aosta. The designs carved into the stone seem to depict clothing, jewelry, or the human form.

The rude early attempts at art that featured simple lines and shapes found in places like Saint Martin de Corléans make their appearance in the game. At one point, a “Gleaming Goddess” appears on the wall. Her simple line-drawing image recalls the basic line carvings allusions to people like those found in pre-historic sites like Saint Martin de Corléans. Next to the gleaming goddess appears crude line-figure shapes that seem to imply sexual intercourse. A similar design is found in stone-age carvings in Sicily, today housed in the *Museo Archeologico Regionale Paolo Orsi* in Syracuse.



Figure 13 (on the right) Pre-historic carvings found in Syracuse, Sicily. Their sexual imagery is very similar to designs found in the game *Anna*.

Figure 14 A pre-historic style image of the goddess appears in *Anna* on the sawmill walls. Note the sexual symbol to its right.

²⁴ John Robb, “Tradition and Agency: Human Body Representations in Later Prehistoric Europe, in *World Archaeology* Vol. 40, No. 3, Tradition (Sep., 2008), pp. 332-353, pg. 340.

If the Earth Mother imagery found in the game reflects the ancient being of the Earth Mother, Anna's mysterious persona also sometimes hints at the Classical ideas of the goddess, especially Diana. The name "Anna" might even hint at a variation of "Diana." Diana was the Italic goddess of the hunt and the forest, usually equated with the Greek deity Artemis. Like many of the pagan deities – especially those equated with fertility – Diana had a consort, the god Dianus. Polytheistic fertility beliefs deemed the marriage of the goddess to a consort as essential for fecundity, both animal and vegetable. This need of the goddess for a male consort seems hinted at in *Anna*. In another book found in the game – *Of Love and Connected Rituals* -- the game describes how the goddess' devotees celebrated a marriage ceremony in which a worshipper "married" the goddess. The book describes something like the famous "sacred marriage – *heiros gamos* – so enduring in the pre-Christian Classical religions. According to the text, marriage rites were sacred to the goddess. Such sacred marriage rituals – which often included ritualized sexual intercourse – featured in the ceremonies of a wide range of pagan fertility religions, including the Eleusinian Mysteries, Isis, and the Celtic tribes.²⁵ The rituals centered on matriarchy, the woman adopting polyandry. A priest sanctioned the sacred marriage as the man swore devotion to the goddess. *Of Love and Connected Rituals* notes that during the ritual, the man had to dedicate himself to his divine bride. He called her by the name "Anna," seeming to link the name Anna with Diana, the most important sacred feminine being in the ancient Val d'Ayas. This sacred power of love and devotion seems to have held men in Diana's thrall. Anna, too, seemed to have this enchanting power over the men she encounters.

Anna's association with sacred goddess figures like Diana also evokes the forest setting around the sawmill, especially the significance of trees. As we have already seen, woodworking played a major role in the culture of the Val d'Ayas, for both necessary items and the Fine Arts. But the importance of trees went beyond merely providing timber for people to use. Trees were also often understood as sacred, a theme once highlighted by Sir James George Frazer in *The Golden Bough*, which discussed "The Worship of Trees."²⁶ Trees were a physical manifestation of the awesome power of nature, embodying the life-giving nature of the sacred principle. In the game, the book *Of Love and Connected Rituals* discusses the significance of trees in ancient religion. It gives special attention given to the forests of Germany, Italy and England. In Italy, this worship of trees accentuated larger beliefs in the life-giving nature of the sacred goddess. Anna's "Temple" in the game is a little forest grove, an ancient clearing hidden under the sawmill. Merriam Webster's Dictionary notes that the very word "temple" derives from the Latin, *templum*, which originally meant a clearing or space. The third century Roman philosopher Porphyry's *Regarding Abstinence (de abstinence)* that the widespread notion of the transmigration of souls helped drive ancient beliefs that souls could be embodied in both animals and plants.²⁷

Perhaps the legend that most closely resembles the tale in *Anna* is that of Tannhauser. Largely due to figures like Richard Wagner, audiences today often equate the story of Tannhauser with epic myth, particularly those associated with Germanic culture. However, the Tannhauser tale is much older than Wagner – a true fairy-tale like legend with myriad forms and regional variations. Beyond Wagner's operatic re-telling, numerous other versions the Tannhauser also exist, notably that of the Brothers Grimm in *German Legends*. Antoine de la Sale's *La Salade*, written in the 1440s, also provides one of the more famous treatments of this popular medieval legend.²⁸ The medieval Scottish poet Thomas the Rhymer (circa 1220-98) also told a similar tale of a man captivated by the "Queen of Faerie."²⁹ Despite its widespread variations, however, the Tannhauser story had especially close associations with Italy. Medieval legends often placed the location of the Tannhauser tale at the "grotto of the Sibyl" in Cumae, Italy – site of the ancient oracle of Apollo who had once guided Aeneas through the underworld.³⁰

²⁵ Joanne Pearson, *A Popular Dictionary of Paganism* (New York: Taylor and Francis Group, 2002), pgs. 70-1.

²⁶ Frazer, *The Golden Bough, Part I, The Magic Art*, Vol. II, (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1913), pg. 7.

²⁷ Porphyry, *Regarding Abstinence*, I. 6, as referenced in Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, Vol. 2, Part I, *The Magic Art and the Evolution of Kings* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1913), pg. 12

²⁸ Norma Lorre Goodrich, *Medieval Myths* (London, United Kingdom: Meridian Books, 1977), pgs. 156-7.

²⁹ Willem de Blécourt, *Tales of magic, tales in print: On the genealogy of fairy tales and the Brothers Grimm* (Manchester, United Kingdom: Manchester University Press, 2012), pg. 199.

³⁰ Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and their Tellers* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Girous, 1994), pg. 9.

In all these versions of the story, a traveler (in chivalric medieval romances, almost always some kind of knight errant) stumbles upon a cave, which many scholars view as the Middle Age's idea of a standing stones site, leftover from pre-Christian times. There, he finds a beautiful maiden – Venus/Aphrodite in the most famous versions of the story. After a long period of sexual thrall with the beautiful woman, he finally pulls himself away from the earthly pleasures of the pagan deity's little grove. Vowing a return to the Faith, the knight treks to Rome to seek forgiveness from the Pope. The Holy Father, however, proves unimpressed with Tannhauser's confession, denying him redemption. In despair, Tannhauser returns to Venus. He thus damns himself to spending the rest of his days in pagan sexual delights.

The story of a mortal man captivated by his lust for an enchanting beauty in Tannhauser bears many resemblances to other famous mythic stories, ranging from Numa and his nocturnal visits to the nymph Egeria, to Odysseus and Calypso, to the dalliance of Prince Ahmed with the genie Peri Banou in *The Arabian Nights*.³¹ This idea of a beautiful female enchantress seeking to lead men into violence or depravity has many antecedents in religion and storytelling, ranging from the femme fatales in the Bible in like Jezebel and Delilah, down to the demonic women who sexually tempted Saint Anthony, among many other examples. Indeed, one could describe Adam's wife Eve as the first "temptress," a beautiful woman using her feminine powers to lead men astray.³² In Classical mythology, the association of women's sexual allure as a temptation to men also features prominently, like the famous tale of Hercules at the Crossroads. According to the story as related by Xenophon, when coming of age, two beautiful women representing vice or virtue appeared to the young Hercules. They bid him to make a choice between a virtuous life of doing the right thing, or an easier but less meaningful life of sensuality and pleasure.³³

The idea of a hidden paradise that one might stumble upon while lost had a certain appeal in a world where geographical knowledge remained murky, even in local settings. This seems an especially prevalent theme in the mountainous regions associated with legends like those of Tannhauser. Local tales sometimes viewed the far-off, unreachable peaks of the Alps as hosting a garden of delights.³⁴ Such notions seem like peasant, mountain versions of the many famous legends and fairy tales that feature lost magic castles, hidden deep in gloomy forests, high mountains, or even somehow floating in the sky. In ambiguous locations, these mystical castles often offered both dangers and delights, often of a sexual nature. They appear as important components of medieval tales, like in the world of Arthurian legends, ranging from the Bertilak's castle in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, to the Grail Castle in Arthurian legend, often associated with Montserrat in Spain. Such castles invariably have murky locations. They often reflect an association with pagan fertility themes of nature like water, forest greenery, or mysterious marshes.³⁵

The figure of Diana/Anna also has a strong resemblance to versions of Morgana the Fey, King Arthur's sister and a powerful fairy enchantress. We know that stories of Morgana appeared widely in northern Italy, probably brought by the Normans during their conquests of the Peninsula.³⁶ Another interesting twist on the Morgana la Fey theme is that Morgana, like Anna, had a secret abode which could only be stumbled upon, usually by wayward travelers.³⁷ In this, the story in *Anna* resembles a "Fairy Tale." As a story, Anna has "Fairy Tale" elements, perhaps more accurately akin to what Ruth B. Bottigheimer describes as a "Tale of Magic."

³¹ D. Ashliman and Ashliman, *Folk and Fairy Tales: A Handbook* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2004), pg. 51.

³² Jean M. Higgins, "The Myth of Eve: The Temptress," in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Dec., 1976, Vol. 44, No. 4 (Dec., 1976), pp. 639-647, pg. 639. See also Xenophon, *Memorabilia* II. 2. 1. 22-34.

³³ Malcolm Davies, "The Temptress throughout the Ages: Further Versions of Heracles at the Crossroads," in *The Classical Quarterly*, Dec., 2004, New Series, Vol. 54, No. 2 (Dec., 2004), pp. 606-610.

³⁴ Maria Savi-Lopez, *Leggende delle Alpi* (Turin, Italy: Piemonte in Bancarella, 2014), pg. 280.

³⁵ Jessie L. Weston, "Glastonbury and the Holy Grail," in *Folklore*, Jun. 30, 1921, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Jun. 30, 1921), pp. 131-133, pg. 132.

³⁶ C. Fitzhugh Talman, "The Real Fata Morgana" in *Scientific American* Vol. 106, No. 15 (APRIL 13, 1912), pp. 335, 345-349, pg. 345.

³⁷ Bengt Holbek, "The Many Abodes of Fata Morgana or the Quest for Meaning in Fairy Tales," in *Journal of Folklore Research* Vol. 22, No. 1 (Apr., 1985), pp. 19-28, pg. 22.

Tales of Magic can be distinguished from commonly recounted folk stories in that they feature special uses of magic, as opposed to common folk stories that merely represent the beliefs of the culture that told them, which can still include elements today we would find superstitious or credulous.³⁸ Such tales often warned of dangers from encountering attractive strangers, or their lairs. In the Alps, beliefs in fairy-like music that could entrance listeners featured prominently. In keeping with the pre-Christian nature of such beliefs, fairy-like spirits dwelled below the earth, unlike the Christian god in heaven.³⁹ One could find them in underground caves, not unlike the one where we find Anna at the end of the videogame.

Anna's association with the forest also highlighted another enduring pagan image, that of the goddess dwelling in a sacred pool or little stream. As well as being situated on what appears to have been a sacred grove, the sawmill in *Anna* also lay adjacent to a clear-running stream. As we saw with the wood of the nearby forest, the sawmill in *Anna*'s location on the site of a rippling-brook would have constituted an obviously desirable feature for nineteenth century people involved in the timber trade. Before the Industrial Revolution, sawmills typically used the power of water to drive their blades, much as mills did for grinding grain. Thus, the natural characteristics that once made the sawmill's location so attractive for ancient pagan cults later made it a similarly ideal location for cutting timber into boards. In another part of the game, a pool of water appears beneath the floorboards of the old mill. Though the pool has become foul and stagnant, documents found in the game report that in ancient times it was a pure and beautiful pond of crystal-clear water.



Figure 15 The little clear-running stream flowing by the sawmill featured in the game Anna. Classical mythology often associated attractive, small streams and springs with feminine personas like nymphs or minor deities.

As with the sacred grove in general, the association of the Anna with water tied-in with larger beliefs in the beauty and power of nature, especially water. In the Classical world, many pagan beliefs associated water with holy properties or divine personas. Indeed, since water is essential to life, some scholars have even seen the veneration of water as a “pan-human” tendency, ranging from ancient beliefs in sacred wells to Christian Baptism or Islamic ablution.⁴⁰ Ancient people often invented gods or supernatural beings to personify water. In Classical times, ancient beliefs often depicted large bodies of water like the sea, mighty rivers or major lakes as masculine, as in Poseidon. Alternatively, smaller, clear pools of water like little streams, springs or ponds often had a feminine connotation, like the *naiads*. The *naiads* were part of the ancient world's bevy of beings murkily described as “nymphs.” In this, Anna seems like she might also be some sort of nymph. In a letter found in the game, a “sabot maker” left behind a note to his brother in which he refers to Anna as a “nymph” he had encountered near the stream outside the sawmill.

³⁸ Ruth B. Bottigheimer, *Fairy Tales: A New History* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2009), pg. 5.

³⁹ Éva Pócs, *Between the Living and the Dead: A Perspective on Witches and Seers in the Early Modern Age*, Translated by Szilvia Redey and Michael Webb (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1999), pg. 150.

⁴⁰ Celeste Ray, *The Origins of Ireland's Holy Wells* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Archaeopress, 2014), pg. 11.

The term “nymph” has an ambiguous definition, seeming to occupy something in the Greek mind in between outright goddess and mortal heroine. The word *numphê* – nymph – can often mean a minor female deity, but more generally refers to something like the English word “bride,” a young maiden of around marrying age, sexually attractive and desirable.⁴¹ A nymph was not necessarily betrothed in the sense we might mean “bride” today. More generally a nymph was young attractive woman -- mettlesome and ripe for the marriage bed. Their divine qualities often made them unattainable for most mortal men. Mythology is full of such alluring feminine figures, ranging from Echo, to Thetis, to figures like Nimue, the Lady of the Lake in Arthurian/Celtic mythology. Another famous nymph was Callisto, Jupiter’s lover turned into a bear by a jealous Juno, as recounted in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. In sympathy for his transformed lover, Jupiter then made Callisto into a constellation, the Great Bear.⁴² Like Anna, Callisto seems to have been a localized figure, stumbled upon by Jupiter as he wandered the haunts of her native Arcadia.⁴³

As well as being an “Earth-Mother” and Classical goddess, Anna also sometimes recalls the witchcraft beliefs of the Christian Middle Ages. Another book found in the game, *The Beauty She Shines Of*, relates how Anna was burned as a witch for curing a sick man using herbs. This seems a classic example of how medieval witch hunters sometimes saw malevolent purposes in those resorting to traditional forms of folk medicine. Records from witchcraft trials in the Middle Ages have sometimes listed the use of healing herbs as one of the charges levelled against witches, particularly in Poland.⁴⁴ The terrible happening left a mark in the sacred places of the goddess. After her execution, the brook flowing by the ancient site of her temple became polluted with sulfurous fumes. To advance in the story, the player will need to purify Anna’s ancient sacred pool.

Another alchemical spell performed in *Anna* makes use of electrum, an amber-colored alloy of gold and silver that has long had alchemical associations. The ancient Romans called electrum “*lidia*.” Electrum has a prominent role in one part of *Anna*. When a large pool of stagnant water pollutes the house, the protagonist purifies the pool with a short spell using electrum. The ancients believed in the mystical powers of electrum, including the ability that it could detect poisons in the water, as reported by the first century Roman Pliny the Elder in his work *Natural History*.⁴⁵ In general, electrum had long fascinated alchemists, dating back to the days in Egypt when priests used it on altars featuring the Eye of Horus.⁴⁶ The ancients believed that electrum purified. It could cast off evil when used in spells. In this regard, votive offerings left by women in ancient times often featured small pins made out of electrum.⁴⁷ In general, the practice of combining metals to make more beautiful or useful alloys forms both part of the history of metallurgy and alchemy. The Arabs had a tale recounted from China that a wise woman had a bell made of electrum that could heal people who heard its sweet ringing. Some sources say that electrum was found on the bottom of sacred temples. They used electrum to purify wells. Some ancient peoples believed that a torch made of cedar/hemp and having electrum sprinkled on the flame could purify a well.⁴⁸

As a witch, Anna had the power to turn men into wood or stone, particularly those who had apparently failed in the trials she required of potential lovers, i.e. the successful completion of the game. Their fossilized figures haunt the sawmill. The wooden figures all around Anna’s sawmill are not unlike the men Circe turned into swine in Homer’s *Odyssey* – deprived of their humanity because of their dalliance with the bewitching sorceress.⁴⁹

⁴¹ Jennifer Larson, *Greek Nymphs: Myth, Cult, Lore* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2001), pg. 3.

⁴² Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, II. 420-531.

⁴³ Kathleen Wall, *Callisto Myth from Ovid to Atwood: Initiation and Rape in Literature* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1988), pg. 14.

⁴⁴ Michael Ostling, “Witches’ Herbs on Trial,” in *Folklore* Vol. 125, No. 2 (August 2014), pp. 179-201, pg. 179.

⁴⁵ Pliny the Elder, 33. 23.

⁴⁶ Harold M. Hays, “The Worshipper and the Worshipped in the Pyramid Texts,” in *Studien Zur Altägyptischen Kultur*, vol. 30, 2002, pp. 153–167, see ff. § 79.

⁴⁷ Joshua Whatmough, “Rehtia, the Venetic Goddess of Healing,” in *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* Vol. 52 (Jul. - Dec., 1922), pp. 212-229, pg. 224.

⁴⁸ Bruce T. Moran, “Art and Artisanship in Early Modern Alchemy, in *Getty Research Journal* No. 5 (2013), pp. 1-14, pg. 1.

⁴⁹ Homer, *The Odyssey*, X. 210-20.

In Anna's grotto, stone figures guard her sacred statue, presumably other men enchanted by Anna who had failed her arduous puzzles and tests. They pose in silence, forever bowing in worship of their beloved goddess. Other mythic creatures and monsters capable of turning people into stone, or similar inanimate matter, are well-known, ranging from Medusa in Greek mythology to Lot's wife in the Bible, turned into a pillar of salt. The Middle Ages featured a number of comparable beliefs, including the old legend that the "Merry Maidens" stone-circle in Cornwall was a bevy of 19 young girls, petrified for dancing on a Sunday, presumably a grave sin.⁵⁰



Figure 16 Petrified "celebrants" guard Anna's cave.

Anna's ability to turn her male admirers into stone or wood reflects an ancient trope widely appearing in myth and folklore, long associated with witchcraft: a witch who turns men into stone if they displease her. Upon reflection, the player attempting to complete *Anna* is actually attempting to pass a series of trials posed by the goddess. If he fails Anna's trials, he will turn to wood and remain forever in the the sawmill. Such a fate equates with other "fail and test and turn to stone" stories, including the Queen Bee by the Brothers Grimm.⁵¹ Such plot devices appear widely in many myths and fairy-tales, ranging from the Princess and the Pea, to the Green Knight. In *Anna*, if the protagonist reaches the entrance of Anna's grotto, but has not fulfilled all the game's various intricacies correctly, Anna's voice notes that he had failed to complete all the steps properly, or otherwise missed important details. The protagonist finds himself back in the sawmill, turned into one of many tree-statues. This means he presumably joins the ranks of the wooden effigies of Anna's other devotees who similarly failed Anna's demands and met similar fates. Ancient fairy tales may have lacked the precision and nuance of today's social science disciplines like psychology, but they understood well enough the phenomenon of having a paralyzing degree of horror or sorrow, a kind of incapacitating swoon which some tales make into a literal form of petrification.⁵²

Along with pre-historic "Earth Mother" associations, and those of classical goddesses, Anna also took on the form of a Roman Catholic saint. In particular, the videogame associates Anna with the cult of Mary Magdalen. Medieval legends recounting how Mary Magdalen had fled to southwestern Europe – usually remembered as Gaul – featured the saint as a forest persona, associated with remote grottos and mountainous locales in numerous settings, ranging from the Spanish Pyrenees, to the French and Italian Alps.

⁵⁰ S. P. Menefee, "The 'Merry Maidens' and the 'Noce de Pierre,'" in *Folklore* Vol. 85, No. 1 (Spring, 1974), pp. 23-42, pg. 23.

⁵¹ Maria M. Tatar, "Born Yesterday: Heroes in the Grimms' Fairy Tales," in *Fairy Tales and Society: Illusion, Allusion, and Paradigm*, edited by Ruth B. Bottigheimer (Philadelphia, PA: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), pgs. 95-114, pg. 98.

⁵² Marie-Louise von Franz, *Archetypal Patterns in Fairy Tales* (Toronto: Inner-City Books, 1997), pg. 86.



Figure 17 Statue of Mary Magdalen in her mountain grotto in the forested Alps at Saint Baume, France, by J. l'Estamperade, at the Church of the Madeleine in Aix-en-Provence.

This association of Anna with Mary Magdalen is much more than merely thematic. Towards the end of the game, *Anna* explicitly links Anna to Saint Mary Magdalen. When we finally see Anna in her sacred final form, she appears as a statue. The statue used to represent Anna at the end of the game is Antonio Canova's "The Penitent Magdalen," done in 1808 as the first marble work north of the Alps.⁵³ Today housed in Genoa's *Palazzo Bianco* museum, Canova's elegant depiction of a tender, beautiful young Magdalen won wide praise. In a twist on the old Pygmalion myth, as recounted in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the protagonist in *Anna* finds an old letter from a parish priest that tells the story of the Mary Magdalen statue in the game.⁵⁴ According to the yellowed letter, the Church had hired a local artist to sculpt a statue of Mary, who fell in a kind of sacred sexual thrall while crafting his masterpiece. He eventually stole the statue, hiding it away to the secret forest grotto.



Figure 18 The image of "Anna" that concludes the game, based on Antonio Canova's 1808 sculpture of the Penitent Mary Magdalen.

The power that the Anna/Mary Magdalen statue seemed to exert over the protagonist in the game *Anna* raises many old themes about the sacred or magical properties of special statues. Scholars have often noted the power of many statues, particularly in the traditions of the plastic arts associated with Greece and Rome. Prior to Christianity, magical events often occurred in close proximity to statues.

⁵³ Ian Wardropper and Thomas F. Rowlands, "Antonio Canova and Quatremère de Quincy: The Gift of Friendship," in *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* Vol. 15, No. 1, *An Educated Taste: Neoclassicism at the Art Institute* (1989), pp. 38-46+85-86, pg. 45.

⁵⁴ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, X. 243-97.

Statues of beautiful men and women in “Classical nude” poses often added an element of sexual intoxication to the power of statues.⁵⁵ In ancient Egypt, priests sometimes used magical spells involving the use of sacred items like amulets to have divine powers enter into their statues.⁵⁶ This linkage between statues and pagan religion was not lost on the ancient Hebrews, who equated sacred statues with idolatry. In the Bible, the famous Hebrew aversion to “graven images” deeply influenced ancient Old Testament culture in terms of the Fine Arts. The decision of the Roman Catholic Church to embrace the Fine Arts, however, opened the door for Classical traditions of painting and sculpture that would greatly shape the evolution of Western Art, religiously and otherwise. In the Middle Ages, statues of saints and biblical figures sometimes became the sites of stories of miraculous occurrences – Virgin Mary statues that wept, or saintly statues people sought out for miraculous healings, among other such familiar tropes. This tradition of miracles occurring at the shrines of saints, which often came to feature statues, relics, or other iconography, appeared early in Italy, among other places. In this way, Christianity sometimes retained the Classical linkage between magic and the Fine Arts, often to the chagrin of more careful Church theologians.⁵⁷

Along with potentially magical statues, Anna’s final resting place in a grotto beneath the sawmill highlights the ancient sacred associations long equated with caves. The game describes the cave as “Anna’s womb.” The mysteries of caves long fascinated early people. Such sacred caves have a long association. Perhaps the most famous is that cave of the Sibyl, the priestess of Apollo who dwelled in Cumae, in Italy. The Cave of the Mysteries in Eleusis, Greece, provides another important example. The use of caves for religious or magical rituals begins early in Europe, well-attested in the fine cave paintings that can often date back to Neanderthal times.⁵⁸ Caves also sometimes featured prominently in Christian myth and symbolism, like the cave at Lourdes where Bernadette Soubirous saw her famous vision of the Virgin Mary. Other caves associated with medieval saints include the Cave of Saint Francis of Assisi in Umbria, and the cave associated with the birth of Christ, sanctified today as the Church of the Nativity in Jerusalem. In Egypt, the Monastery of Saint Anthony centers its complex of living spaces around the cave supposedly inhabited by the famous hermit saint, Christianity’s “first monk.” Mary Magdalen’s apocryphal story also fits into this idea of a saint in a cave. Mary Magdalen supposedly spent her last years in a cave high in the French mountains near Sainte Baume, in France. In general, the Catholic Church today displays many saintly statues in grottos or settings that allude artistically to grottos.

⁵⁵ Derek Collins, “Nature, Cause, and Agency in Greek Magic,” in *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1974-2014) Vol. 133, No. 1 (Spring, 2003), pp. 17-49, pgs. 46-7.

⁵⁶ Andrew T. Wilburn, *Materia Magica: The Archaeology of Magic in Roman Egypt, Cyprus, and Spain* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2012), pg. 38, ff# 95.

⁵⁷ Janine Larmon Peterson, *Suspect Saints and Holy Heretics: Disputed Sanctity and Communal Identity in Late Medieval Italy* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2019), pg. 26.

⁵⁸ Jean Clottes, “Ritual Cave use in European Paleolithic Caves,” in *Sacred Darkness: A Global Perspective on the Ritual Use of Caves*, edited by Holley Moyes (Boulder, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 2012), pgs. Pgs. 40-57, pg. 40.



Figure 19 Statue of Mary Magdalen in the crypt at Saint Maximin la Sainte Baume, France, evoking the image of the saint in her grotto.

In conclusion, several significant points warrant mention. First, this is not a “review” of the videogame *Anna*. Others can determine for themselves whether they find the game’s blend of puzzles, storytelling, and local lore to have resulted in a successful entertainment product. The game’s lack of an overarching, clear-cut narrative will probably frustrate many players. While some have praised the game’s graphics, its singular setting of a broken-down sawmill will probably bore some twenty-first century gamers more accustomed to dazzling, open-world epics. What the game does do well, however, is provide a moving and emotional treatment of the devotion that the goddess – in all her myriads of forms – has inspired over the ages. Though the game leaves her exact nature as something of an open-ended mystery, the tidbits of clues about Anna’s divine persona will no doubt fascinate many. Perhaps most importantly, the game combines a story about Anna’s sacred, feminine figure with the colorful legends and local flavor of the Val d’Ayas. This makes it an engaging experience for those who enjoy unique geography, popular culture, and the myths they often entail. In the end, *Anna* reminds us of the importance of videogames as a still underappreciated outlet for the creative visions of artists, storytellers, and scholars.



Figure 20 Sign in front of the Community Center of the Church in Champoluc, in the Val d’Ayas.