

# Game Narrative Review

---

**Game Title:** Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem

**Platform:** Gamecube

**Genre:** Psychological Horror

**Release Date:** June 23, 2002

**Developer:** Silicon Knights

**Publisher:** Nintendo

**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** Denis Dyack

**Author of this review:** Nathan Palson

**School:** Rochester Institute of Technology

## Overview

---

Two thousand years ago in Persia, a campaigning Roman centurion by the name of Pious Augustus discovers an ancient buried city filled with unnatural beasts. Called inward by voices he can barely perceive, he finds three floating artifacts, each pulsing with a foul energy. He touches one, and is wracked with an intense pain--as his body is transformed into a liche by the Ancient whose essence he just absorbed! Realizing the futility of human existence in the face of such godlike powers, he bows to the will of the Ancient that transformed him.

Over the next several centuries, he works behind the scenes at his dark master's behest, manipulating human history to the purpose of bringing his accursed sponsor into the physical world. He is opposed by the keepers of the Tome of Eternal Darkness, people who find themselves in extraordinary circumstances and must do whatever they can to survive. The book itself imbues its chosen holder with minor magical power and knowledge of the struggle against the Ancients trying to pierce the veil of reality. Pious has the support of his Ancient's foul minions--the undead, the abyssal, the terrifying, that which simply should not exist. Opposing him means combating creatures that drive men to madness with a simple glance. Most keepers die in their attempts to stop his plans. Can the Darkness be kept at bay?

## Characters

---

- **ALEXANDRA ROIVAS** -- The primary protagonist and the player's controlled character when between 'chapters,' as well as during the game's intro and finale. Alexandra Roivas is a college student investigating her grandfather's recent murder in their ancestral home in Rhode Island. She discovers the Tome of Eternal Darkness in a hidden chamber in the mansion and reads of the exploits of its previous bearers, slowly piecing together Pious's plans and how she must disrupt them. Alex is strong-willed but unsure of how to cope with her world being upended, and is extremely disturbed by the accounts of so many violent battles and deaths with supernatural forces--several of which occur in the very

mansion in which she sits. She has a slender frame, pale skin and long blond hair tied back into a ponytail. She is always seen wearing a black tanktop and jeans, and has a marked resemblance to Buffy the Vampire Slayer.

- **PIOUS AUGUSTUS** -- Before finding the artifact that would change his life forever, Pious Augustus was a Roman Centurion. After finding it, he became a liche in service to one of three Ancients--which one depends on which artifact the player made him take. Regardless of which he takes, his flesh sloughs off his broad frame, leaving a skeletal body wearing ancient and heavily worn armor. He retains a distinctive crested helm, missing several of its feathers after his transformation into necromantic abomination. He uses a staff composed of a human spinal column capped with a pelvis, a weapon and a tool enchanted with his patron's magick. A skilled illusionist, fighter and manipulator, he often deceives the player characters as to his true goals or nature until it's too late for them to react. He's utterly devoted to his patron, and believes him superior over all others. Arrogant, callous, calculating, and cautious, Pious is a skilled antagonist.
- **CHATTUR'GHA** -- One of the three Ancients to which Pious may dedicate himself. Chatur'gha is the Ancient of strength, power and general physical prowess. Resembling something of a giant cross between a crab and a lobster, it speaks in a low angry rumble. It is represented by the color red, and its minions are the most physically robust of the three, occasionally possessing the power to regrow limbs. Chatur'gha has a strategic advantage over Xel'lotath, and is unaffected by her plotting and manipulations, seizing the straight solution.
- **ULYAOTH** -- The Ancient of Magick and the dimensional planes, Ulyaoth's servants are experts at denying their opponents use of magick. Resembling a giant jellyfish, Ulyaoth speaks in a confident, oily tone, a practiced if arrogant communicator compared to the other two. Ulyaoth is represented by the color blue. Ulyaoth is capable of bending Chatur'gha's strength back on himself, avoiding the mighty Ancient's blows and seizing the advantage.
- **XEL'LOTATH** -- The patron of madness and knowledge, this Ancient is represented by the color green. Her minions are the most mentally disturbing of the three, and reduce otherwise stable people to gibbering madmen all the sooner. Appearing as a giant four-armed eel with a prominent central eye, Xel'lotath speaks in two voices, one confident, commanding, and polite, the other whispery and more whimsical. She has the foresight to manipulate her way around Ulyaoth's spells, unweaving the planner's plans.
- **MANTOROK** -- The 'Corpse God', Mantorok is the keeper, the one who maintains the balance of power between the other three. Composed of hundreds of giant eyes and mouths in a mound, Mantorok is the only Ancient of the four with an actual presence on the physical plane. Mantorok is actually the one manipulating things behind the scenes--the Tome of Eternal Darkness is heavily

implied to be his creation, and he outright states that he manipulates the Roivas family to oppose and topple the plans of each of the ancients to pierce the Veil of Reality. Somewhat benevolent, he is the only Ancient left standing after the game's true ending, in which he merges the three timelines in which the Ancients kill each other.

- **EDWARD ROIVAS** -- The narrator for much of the game, Edward Roivas is a clinical psychologist who discovered the source of his ancestor Maximillian's madness in the city of Ehn'gha, a giant underground relic beneath the Roivas family mansion. Equipping himself well and mustering his courage, he descends into the city to purge it of its inhabitants, who all serve Pious's ancient. His murder (at the hands of a monster who survived his purgation) is what drives Alex to involvement in the game's storyline. Edward Roivas is a physically small but quick-witted and grand-thinking man, who coordinates much of the mustering against Pious in the 20th century.
- **MAXIMILLIAN ROIVAS** -- The first of the Roivas family to discover the City of Ehn'gha beneath the mansion. Maximillian goes insane and ends up confined in an asylum for his actions in his defense against bonethieves, creatures that dig into and inhabit the bodies of humans to control their actions and ambush other people that may be working against their masters. His warnings to the world relating to the city fall on deaf ears, and it's not until Edward comes through some two hundred years later that the spirit of Maximillian can likely sleep.
- **KARIM** -- An Arabic swordsman who sought one of the artifacts to deliver to the object of his affection, a woman named Chandra. Chandra appears before him as a ghost before he claims it, however, and warns him of its true nature. She persuades him to sacrifice himself to defend it from the forces of Pious, who will come to try and claim it. He accepts, and later bequeaths the artifact to Roberto Bianchi when Roberto is searching the ruins. He seems something of a brash youth in his dialogue, but acts selflessly and remains resolute in desperate situations.
- **ANTHONY** -- A messenger to Charlemagne, Anthony is cursed when he opens a letter intended for the aspiring emperor. Realizing the implications of conspiracy, he rushes to tell Charlemagne, with the magick still wracking his body. He arrives too late--Charlemagne has been killed and the magick has transformed Anthony into a zombie, cursed to mourn his failure for hundreds of years. Anthony starts vibrant and enthusiastic, and, while he retains his determination, his vibrancy is sapped away as he slowly turns into a broken-spirited, shambling corpse.
- **ELLIA** -- Ellia is a thrill-seeking slave girl in Cambodia who gets trapped with Pious in the temple in which Mantorok resides. Mantorok blesses her with his essence, at which point Pious hunts her down and demands to know where it is. Refusing to reveal its location, Pious kills Ellia, but the power of Mantorok's

essence zombifies her body and forces her to watch over it for the next 400 years or so, until she can deliver it to Edwin Lindsey when he explores the temple.

- **ROBERTO BIANCHI** -- A Venetian architect captured by Pious's forces while traveling the world looking for fame and fortune. He is forced to survey the sight of a giant pillar in honor of Pious's greatness, and encounters Karim, who bestows one of the four artifacts on him. He manages to hide it from Pious until he's mixed into the cement for his new project, and finally delivers the essence as a ghost to Michael Edwards.
- **PAUL LUTHER** -- A Franciscan monk on a pilgrimage to Oublie Cathedral in Amiens, France, the site of Charlemagne's assassination. He stumbles upon the corpse of the last Franciscan to come through the cathedral, and is placed under suspicion for murder by the Inquisition. Escaping his confines, he investigates, and discovers Anthony. Anthony went insane long prior to his discovery, and Paul must put him down. Paul eventually finds a gigantic creature in servitude to Pious's master. The creature kills Paul outright in its defense of the artifact that Pious and his master fear the most--the dominant elemental artifact.
- **PETER JACOB** -- A wartime photographer operating during the first world war, Peter Jacob notices that the field hospital (located in Oublie Cathedral) he is investigating is suffering from a large number of disappearances in the night. Apparently the patients are being fed directly to the Black Guardian, the creature that killed Paul all of those years ago. Peter manages to defeat the beast and retrieve the artifact, delivering it to Edward many years later.
- **EDWIN LINDSEY** -- Edwin Lindsey is an adventurer / explorer archetype who is exploring a temple that was recently uncovered via new sciences. This temple is the temple in which Mantorok is housed, and Pious Augustus (posing as a "Paul Augustine") attempts to kill him for his potential contact with the Keeper. He survives and escapes with the Essence of Mantorok he received from Ellia.
- **MICHAEL EDWARDS** -- A Canadian firefighter in Kuwait fighting fires started during the First Gulf War. An unexpected explosion opens the way for Michael to arrive in the Forbidden City, where Pious was tainted all of those years ago. There he meets the spirit of Roberto Bianchi, who grants him the artifact Roberto was given by Karim. Escaping and delivering it to Edward, Michael's is one of two stories we know of which did not end immediately badly for the character involved.

## **Breakdown**

---

The story is a set up as a collection of short stories, with the Necronomicon-analogue serving as the in-universe container for all of these tales. Each story has the player contributing in some way--no matter how minute--to stopping Pious's quest to

bring an Elder-God-equivalent into the physical plane. To say that this borrows heavily from the Cthulhu mythos would be an understatement.

Apart from Edward and Alexandra Roivas, all of the various keepers of the Tome of Eternal Darkness are in for essentially one chapter and a cameo in ghost form (or zombie form) in a second. While this keeps their short story structure together, it provides them with less time to show character development over the course of a stage and as a result they come across as less important--although they tend to be just as interesting as Alex and Edward themselves. Pious, thankfully, remains an excellent villain no matter his patron. The patrons each fit their theme nicely, but seem somewhat flat in characterization, although that fits what they're supposed to be--giant godlike creatures outside of our comprehension.

Through roughly three quarters of the game, the player takes control of a different doomed regular Joe each chapter. It's not until Edwin Lindsey's chapter that a character manages to work against Pious's plot *and* survive, and the first truly aggressive blow is dealt by Edward Roivas himself.

The developers were really big on puns and wordplay in important names--Pious for the irony, and Savior backwards for the primary protagonist's family line.

Gameplay and narrative were tied together expertly with the magic system tying into the main plot in the climax (summoning the Ancient with the right elemental advantage) and the strongest turning point (dispelling the magic holding the creatures on our dimension in Ehn'gha). It also was well integrated with equipment loadouts in the different chapters--for example, Edward's flask of "Liquid Courage", implying a drinking problem, or Karim's family amulet that's supposed to bring good health and long life, implying that the general market for the supernatural may not be as foolish as one might think.

That said, the narrative didn't branch all that much in respect to differences in gameplay. Apart from the initial choice in the first chapter of what patron Pious will work for, the game basically is a single path, although there's still something to be said for its skill of execution.

Gameplay also bleeds into the metanarrative quite well with sanity effects. When an enemy targets the player, the player loses a bit of sanity. The more sanity you lose, the more the world will play with your sense of what's there and what isn't, and give things like fake error screens or controller disconnection reports. The choice to mess directly with the player paints the fourth wall quite well, drawing the player in, but also drawing them out of their respective chapters with the reminder that yes, there is indeed a fourth wall to paint.

Some of the strongest turning points in the game include Lindsey's chapter (finally survive an encounter with Pious), Peter's chapter (finally kill the Black Guardian, a tough boss enemy under Pious's influence), and Edward's chapter (strike at and cleanse the Rl'yeh analogue, Ehn'gha).

## **Strongest Element**

---

The game's overall chapter-based structure pays homage to H. P. Lovecraft's work, from which the game borrows heavily. Most of Lovecraft's work was in the form of short stories, which is effectively what we are given in the form of the individual chapters, unified only by their contact with the opposition and the places in which their

given battle was met. It also lends a unity to the time periods in the game that drives home the point that this is not a recent struggle--this is something that's been happening for the last two millennia, and this is a fight that's dragged in unsuspecting players from every era in our history. With its genre in mind, it's quite appropriate that the game's strongest element to its narrative is such a subtle one.

## Unsuccessful Element

---

The elemental rock-paper-scissors dichotomy of the Ancients was driven home somewhat excessively. In some places, the lines that change to suit whichever Ancient you selected when playing as Pious in the beginning of the game seem something like a simple ad-libs style name replacement, and fleshing out more differences in their respective means would have gone a long way to make their characters more unique from each other.

## Highlight

---

The absolute best moment in the game's narrative is wading into the archaic hostile City of Ehn'gha as tiny clinical psychologist Edward, geared out with an antique cavalry saber, a double-barreled hunting shotgun, a revolver, and an elephant gun--and the intent to strike a telling blow against this force that's been twisting all of human history. In essentially all previous encounters with the forces of the Eternal Darkness, the protagonist of the moment comes away from it dead, insane or otherwise lost to the cause. Edward, on the other hand, takes up potentially the hardest challenge and succeeds due to his foresight, cleverness and determination, which comes across as due to the player's actions--in gearing the player for the conflict through his chapter, identifying the means by which the entire city may be purged, and then going through with it successfully, escaping in time to watch the fireworks! Coming after so many scenarios in which the player *must* fail in order to proceed, Edward's chapter allows the player to drive the turning point in the battle against Pious and his master themselves.

## Critical Reception

---

Matt Casamassina of IGN wrote on *Eternal Darkness* saying that it possessed a "brilliantly crafted", "gripping, mature storyline spanning over 20 centuries", as well as "a host of historically accurate weapons" and "exquisite attention to detail ranging from Latin voiceovers to historically accurate fighting styles". Overall, he seemed highly impressed with the level of precision in the work, with good attention to integrating gameplay sensibly with the narrative. He gave it overall a 9.6.

Paul Levesque of GameSpy says that *Eternal Darkness's* inevitable comparisons to the *Resident Evil* series will not do the game justice. The cast is diverse, with the locations tying together their plots--and the progression through the locations in new and different ways giving both continuity and fresh gameplay. With in-game events mirroring actual history, *Eternal Darkness* perpetuates its illusion of reality very adeptly. Overall, he gave it an 8.7.

Pong Sifu of GamePro gave it an overall 9.0. On the story, he remarked that it's a thoroughly engaging narrative, each substory contributing to it well. He mentions it as

one of the high points for the overall game, and says it won't disappoint even survival horror vets.

## Lessons

---

- Take the time to show your characters at more than two overall points in their respective narratives to show character development. This is why Alex and Edward seemed like so much stronger characters than the rest--they were better developed.
- Playing with the fourth wall is a good way to invoke unease or unsettling environs, although will detract from immersion. Reminding the player that there's a volume control or a controller input socket will draw the player away from the narrative immersion, but other such interaction can also increase the level of empathy with which you experience what happens to the character's broken mind.
- Make sure the gameplay matches the tone of the narrative at the given point in the game, like with Edward's well-equipped and methodical solution to fixing the problem, or with Maximillian's desperate paranoia concerning his servants.

## Summation

---

*Eternal Darkness's* 'short story' style structure helped the writers make it feel like an eternal struggle, and allowed them to make any given protagonist actually lose without denying the player progress. This allowed them to make a darker game than what they could manage with only one protagonist (can only zombify a guy once). The toying *Eternal Darkness* did with the fourth wall in its gameplay at times helped draw the player into the narrative quite well, and keeps it distinct among horror games. They also simply execute the basic tasks involved in writing a game expertly--employing good attention to detail, using a solid grand dramatic arc (although one that can get quite confusing when set to an actual chronological timeline) to keep the player playing, and leaving a good deal of hinting about the game world open, allowing the player to simply wonder. For these reasons, it was worth analysis.