

# Game Narrative Review

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**Game Title:** *Disgaea 3: Absence of Justice*

**Platform:** Playstation 3

**Genre:** Tactical RPG

**Release Date:** January 31, 2008 (Japan); August 26, 2008 (America)

**Developer:** Nippon Ichi

**Publisher:** Nippon Ichi

**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** Sohei Niikawa (Producer)

**Author of this review:** Jaddua Ross

**School:** The Guildhall at SMU

## Overview

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This story, like the others in the Disgaea series, takes place in the Netherworld, a place run by demons and ruled by an Overlord. This installment, however, revolves around the Netherworld Evil Academy, a school for demons that turns the human scholastic system upside down. Honor students never attend class or complete homework, only delinquents do.

Within this setting, the “hero” of the game, Mao, the number one honor student, sets out to take revenge on his father, the Overlord, for stepping on Mao’s video game console and destroying 20,000 hours of work in saved games. While reading his manga, he decides he must become a hero to defeat his father. So he decides to capture a hero and study him. His childhood friend, Raspberyl, the number one delinquent, learns of his plan and fears she may lose her standing as number one delinquent, so tries to dissuade him.

A convoluted plot follows that includes exploring the depth of Mao’s subconscious, and a surprise betrayal by his trusted butler, Geoffrey, who turns out to be a Super Hero. Ultimately, because of the friends he made, Mao does not release the evil inside him, which would completely destroy his personality and make him an ultimate evil. He defeats the Super Hero, taking his father’s place as Overlord.

## Characters

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- **Mao** – The main character, evil genius, number one honor student, and son of the Overlord, Mao has a 1,800,000 EQ (Evility Quotient). Mao has a nerdy, mad scientist flavor, and is utterly ruthless in pursuit of his goals. He reluctantly accepts the friendship of the characters in his party, but rationalizes why he keeps them around, making them underlings or taking them prisoner. Early in the story revenge drives him, but he discovers his own culpability in the death of his father, and guilt drives him for a time. Finally, on discovering the betrayal at Geoffrey's hands, revenge drives him again, but the words of his friends keep him from releasing the ultimate evil.

- **Raspberyl** – Number One delinquent and childhood friend of Mao; she prides herself on her scholastic ability and constantly pursues perfection, although perversely as in this world standards are reversed. Although she appears kind and compassionate, there is a note of insincerity, as she dons kindness and compassion only for the sake of becoming the Legendary Delinquent, rather than from any actual empathy.



- **Almaz** – A wannabe hero on a quest to defeat the overlord. He has a crush on the Princess Sapphire from when he served as a palace guard. Out of his league in the underworld, Mao defeats him early on and steals his hero title, giving him a demon title instead. Almaz slowly begins to turn into an actual demon, and Mao forces Almaz to become his servant, which Almaz does in hopes that Mao will return the title before he turns fully into a demon.

- **Sapphire** – A princess from the human world. After watching hundreds of heroes die to protect her, she vowed to become so tough that nobody will have to die for her again. She lost the ability to cry, presumably from some trauma in her youth. The fact that she was not able to cry at the death of her mother tortures her. Although quite feminine, demonstrated by her inability to resist anything cute, she is also a cold, bloodthirsty killing machine.



- **Geoffrey/Aurum** – At the beginning of the game, Geoffrey appears to be Mao's loyal butler. As the game progresses, however, his behavior becomes more and more suspect. Toward the end of the game, he reveals he is actually the Super Hero Aurum in disguise, who defeated the Overlord 200 years ago and has been training Mao ever since to be the ultimate Overlord, so that Aurum could finally be defeated and rest. He further reveals that he orchestrated most of the events in the main story.

## Breakdown

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Disgaea 3 has an almost entirely linear story, broken down into chapters, and within each chapter there are a series of battles. Some of the battles have no story associated, but most begin with a cutscene that explains the reason for the battle, and most of those have another cutscene afterwards explaining the aftermath. The beginning and end of each chapter features a further cutscene that bookends the story arc for the chapter. The extremely long story is convoluted, does not always make sense, and does not always flow well.

Essentially the narrative structure parallels the hero's journey, although in a sense the game inverts this journey as it takes place already in the Netherworld already and our "hero" is actually an evil genius seeking the power of a hero in order to exact revenge on his father. Through the mechanism of the "Heart Vault", the underworld the hero explores is actually his own subconscious. Through this process, he (inadvertently) accomplishes many heroic objectives, including rescuing friends, recovering a talisman, restoring his memory, and sacrificing himself for the good of his community. But except for the last, he does each of these things for the "wrong" reasons, or at least that is what he proclaims, although there is the sense that he is rationalizing away his empathy and compassion. Ultimately, he learns truths about himself and transforms, yet remains outwardly himself.

Several side stories thread throughout the story, often focusing on Almaz and Sapphire's romance, and Almaz's impending transformation into a demon. Later in the story, he also sacrifices himself by grabbing a cursed stuffed toy before Sapphire touches it, and hiding his resulting illness. He ultimately dies but a mysterious force, related somehow to Mao, brings him back to life, and upon his resurrection he has his original title and is no longer a demon. Sapphire is so overjoyed she cries, concluding her side story about her inability to cry.

These themes could easily turn schmaltzy and heavy-handed, but the curious humor and the special inversion of standards of this particular world make them instead charming and even heart-warming.

After completion of the main narrative, the game provides several subsequent and alternate stories, some shipping with the game and others available through downloadable content.

## **Strongest Element**

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Humor is the single strongest element in the storyline. Humor can be difficult enough in an original language, but can be even more so when translated. With a few notable exceptions, the original story was so funny, and the localization so effective, that the game remains very humorous, albeit with a strong Japanese sensibility. For example, Raspberyl's frequent moral conundrums about doing the right thing (i.e. the wrong thing), and Mao's rationalizations of the doing the wrong thing (i.e. the right thing) are amusing in any language.

## **Unsuccessful Element**

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The convoluted nature of the story combined with the predictable storytelling mechanism to make it difficult for the player to follow the thread of the story. The player views a static portrait cutscene, has a battle, and then views another static portrait cutscene. Between battles the player typically performs at least some level grinding, certainly not getting to view more than two or three story-containing battles in a row unless he had significantly leveled up before hand. This problematic interaction with the gameplay, combined with the number of non-sequiturs and plot twists the story contains (not to mention its sheer length) often loses the player along the way.

## **Highlight**

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The highlight of the story was the final confrontation with Aurum. He explains many things that did not completely make sense in the story, and several characters get their moment to shine. Raspberyl in particular lambasts Aurum, saying how she looked up to him and what a total failure he was as a hero. Likewise, Mao gets to unleash his frustration at the way Geoffrey/Aurum has manipulated him throughout the story and through this achieves a kind of redemption.

## **Critical Reception**

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The critical reception of Disgaea 3 was fairly positive, although somewhat mixed, with Metacritic scores in the upper 70s.

Ryan Clements at IGN gave one of the lower reviews, at 67. Mostly this was due to the graphics, but he did comment about the story, saying that "the narrative...is poorly told and sometimes pointless" and that although the narrative began to get intriguing "watching everything play out through static portrait cutscenes is getting excruciatingly old".

Likewise Eduardo Vasconcellos of GameSpy gave a review of 3.5/5 and says "The story is nonsense, but it does manage to entertain."

Finally, Alicia of WorthPlaying.com found the characters likeable and the story "more of a true comedy than Disgaea 2's strangely earnest attempt". She did however, say "I was getting pretty tired of the 'opposite day' jokes...by the time the credits rolled." She gave the game a 7.5/10.

The consensus among reviewers was that fans of the series would enjoy the story, but those new to it would find the in-jokes somewhat inaccessible.

## **Lessons**

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- How you tell a story can be as important as the quality of the story itself. With technology advancing, audiences, particularly American ones, are less willing to endure traditional narrative techniques such as static portrait cutscenes.
- Humor, although difficult to pull off, will gain a writer quite a bit of forgiveness and tolerance on behalf of the player.
- Less is often more – telling a long story with a lot of twists and turns is enjoyable and a good value to a player, but you have to make sure you do not lose him along the way.
- A story can retell familiar narrative structures as long as it gives a new twist and obscures the clichéd elements.
- A fan base has substantial power to keep a series alive.

## **Summation**

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Disgaea 3, although telling a complicated, and at times nonsensical story, with elements that are familiar and even clichéd, nevertheless manages to endear us to the characters and the world, largely through the use of humor and characterization. The game also demonstrates some key differences between the Japanese and American audiences, and how Americans are coming to view traditional methods of in-game RPG storytelling as outmoded.