

Game Narrative Review

Game Title: Shadowbane

Platform: PC

Genre: MMORPG

Release Date: March 25, 2003

Developer: Wolfpack Studios

Publisher: Ubisoft

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Sam "Meridian" Johnson

Author of this review: John Goyette

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Overview

Shadowbane was a dark fantasy MMORPG that took place in a world called Aerynth from 2003 until the servers closed in 2009. Aerynth was a world torn asunder by a legendary sword named Shadowbane, which granted its user extraordinary power, but also bestowed an equally horrible curse. The last time the sword appeared it caused the "Turning", ending the Age of Kings and beginning the Age of Strife, in which all player characters subsisted. From that point on, no man or woman could experience permanent death; everyone in the Age of Strife exists in a type of purgatory until the gods return to the world.

There could be no mistake as to the point of the game – the motto was "play to crush" and players did just that in online servers where politics and strategy demanded that one learned to kill or be killed. Only three safe cities existed in the world where players could not attack each other. However, the fighting was not mindless or on the level of an FPS game. When a player died it was truly painful as their entire inventory was lost and their equipment became severely damaged. Players chose their sides wisely since dying was not fun and angering the wrong faction could lead an all-out war between guilds, which often meant that cities (that required a significant investment of time and gold to construct) were on the chopping block. This random and all out killing makes sense, especially when one considers historical events such as Rome after being sacked by barbarians. Confusion, anger, and opportunism led to a very hostile environment. The creator of the lore, Sam "Meridian" Johnson put it best in an online interview, "In feel, Aerynth as I imagine it owes as much, if not more, to the Road Warrior than it does to Lord of the Rings. Imagine... tight-knit groups of people building settlements and trying to make a better world, while all around them the marauders try to pull it all (and each other) down." (theburninghorde.com). Players who enjoy roaming around killing each other with reckless abandon are not out of place in Aerynth, neither are those who would prefer to build and roleplay.

Characters

Playable characters in Shadowbane are most prominently identifiable by their race. Whether one was Human, Dwarf, Elf, Centaur, Irekei, or Minotaur, determined what friends and enemies a player might have. Of course, there were always players who chose to ignore the lore, but they often did so to their own detriment, as, especially on the servers designated for loreplay, almost all of the well-established guilds chose to follow a specific god or storyline. Guilds that might not otherwise be friendly but followed the same god banded together during wars or sieges simply because it made sense within the lore to do so. However, guilds that accepted any race or class often found themselves a mutual target of every other guild on the server. Shadowbane was unique in this respect: the storyline dictated how players and guilds acted towards each other, even though there was no rule to do so. Each guild knew that no matter what losses occurred today, tomorrow their god might return to shift the balance.

There are seven “True Gods”, one of whom was killed during the Age of Twilight (the age immediately before the Age of Kings) by the Dragon – who is not considered a god but is older than even the All-Father and is equally if not more powerful than all of the gods combined. Thurin’s sole purpose in crafting Shadowbane was to destroy the dragon, but it is unknown if even Aerynth’s most powerful weapon is strong enough to slay a creature older than the gods themselves.

- **ALL-FATHER** – Not all children of Aerynth worship the All-Father but few can deny his influence. His first creation was the Elves, then later the Giants and Humans. Considered the most human of the gods due to his great successes and towering failures, the All-Father has both a jovial manner and a fearsome temper. Although the All-Father fell silent at the turning, which many interpret as his death, others believe that the king of gods has embarked on a quest to perform unknown feats, and that he will return to destroy the wicked and heal the world, as he has done twice before.
- **BRAIALLA THE GREEN MOTHER** – Oldest of the goddesses, Braialla is responsible for all that lives and grows in Aerynth. Revered as the mother of bounty and fertility, Braialla has little concern for the affairs of the world, renouncing those who do as foolish. Since the attack of the Dragon, many believe that parts of Braialla exist on every fragment of Aerynth and the world will heal only when these pieces rejoin.
- **KENARYN THE HUNTER** – Happiest and most carefree of all the gods, Kenaryn is the Lord of the Hunt and father of the Centaurs. Before his wife, Saedron, went mad, Kenaryn loved the spirit of adventure and chase. Afterwards, he dedicated his life to restoring Saedron’s sanity by hunting Grallokur, a hideous beast born from Saedron’s madness. Many fear that his silence since the turning means that he met his match.
- **MALOG THE WARRIOR** – Fairest of all the gods, Malog was matchless in battle and wrath. After marrying Volliandra, Malog had little respite, as the Dragon maimed his once beautiful face and killed his wife soon after the wedding. Since then Malog withdrew in pain and rage and became known for his evil and deception, going so far as try to murder the All-Father.

- **SAEDRON THE FATE WEAVER** – Wisest of the goddesses, Saedron was imprisoned on the moon in a pillar of ice before Kenaryn found and freed her. Some legends depict her as the source of all magic, claiming that she first taught sorcery and wizardry to the Elves. Her affinity with magic has led some to believe that she has knowledge of the future and that she is responsible for the fate of every living being. However, after the encounter with the Dragon, Saedron felt the pain of her sister Volliandra, and subsequently driven mad as a result. Few now worship her, as she is seen now a force of chaos and strife.
- **THURIN THE SHAPER** – Thurin is known for being incredibly strong and for his skill at forging and crafting. He is responsible for the creation of the Dwarves, whom he created in his image. His greatest work was the sword Shadowbane, though the effort cost him his left hand. He is the most loyal follower of the All-Father, and many believe that he is working underground with the Dwarves to repair Aerynth since the turning.
- **VOLLIANDRA THE DREAM SINGER** – Fairest of all the goddesses, Volliandra was awakened by Braialla, and loved all creatures of Aerynth. Her beauty and songs inspired especially the Elves and Centaurs. Malog underwent many impossible quests in order to woo her before she agreed to marry him. However, before the two could have children, the Dragon killed her.
- **THE DRAGON** – Known as the Terror of Terrors, the Dragon existed in caverns beneath Aerynth before the All-Father awoke life on the surface. The Dragon is responsible for creating the sun and moon, but is more infamous for murdering Volliandra, driving Saedron mad, and maiming Malog. It took the strength of all the True Gods to drive the dragon back to his lair. Only the Irekei, the desert brethren of the Elves, dare to worship the Dragon.

Breakdown

The Age of Kings was most notable for an all-out war between Humans and Elves, which cost countless lives but saw little progress by either side. This changed however, when the Humans were able to acquire Shadowbane. Previously impenetrable Elvish cities crumbled and fell under the inevitable surge of the Human king Cambruin, champion of the All-Father, who wielded the deadly sword. Little did he know however, a traitor was in his midst – as Cambruin chased the remnants of the Elvish host near their final fortress city of Kierhaven, he found himself in a glade near an ancient oak tree. Led there by this traitor, whose name is lost to history, Elvish assassins who lied in wait attacked Cambruin. Gerriant, one his most loyal paladins, threw himself upon the king to protect him, sending the sword tumbling to the ground. At this moment, the traitor took the Shadowbane sword from the king, drove the blade through his heart, and pinned him to the ancient tree, fulfilling the sword's curse. The oak upon which the king died was the first tree, the world tree, and as it drank the blood of Cambruin the All-Father and the rest of the gods disappeared and the doors of heaven and hell closed with their absence.

As far as the player is concerned, the murder of Cambruin took place the day before they started playing the game. Events may occur in game that shift the balance to different factions and gods, but without any permanent death, everything is temporary. However,

this does not mean that the player has no control or is powerless to make any impact on the world. At any moment, Shadowbane could reappear and once again change the tides. Players spent countless hours on the forums guessing as to possible locations or scenarios where the sword might once again surface. Thanks to the strong focus on lore and storyline, Aerynth felt like a world that was waiting for the right person to come along and save or destroy it.

Strongest Element

The strongest element of the story was that players were never quite sure who did what, which god was actually the strongest, or, in general, what exactly was going on. Who was the traitor that killed Cambruin? There were entire guilds dedicated to the idea that Cambruin was not betrayed at all, that it was actually one of the gods (typically assumed to be Malog) who slayed the king – which therefore meant that they became mortal enemies of any guilds that followed that god. After all, Malog tried to kill the All-Father, so why not try to kill his greatest champion? Maybe there is a power struggle behind the scenes and when the dust clears, the people who stay faithful to their god will reap the benefits. There was enough ambiguity in the story to allow individual interpretations of how and why things had happened. Players who were well versed in the lore earned respect among the community for their take on events, even when applied to in game politics such as guild X attacking guild Y. Their opinion could sometimes make allies into enemies and vice versa. The man with one eye was king in the land of the blind in Shadowbane.

Unsuccessful Element

Technical issues that were never fully resolved plagued Shadowbane until its death. There was always server lag, exploiting, and duping of items. However, it appeared as if players could tolerate that if only the storyline had continued, which is a testament to the greatness of the game. In 2006, Ubisoft cut funding to Wolfpack and the team drastically downsized, forcing the studio to stop all in game events. Without the possibility of the storyline advancing, players found little joy in following gods. As a result, many of the major guilds that adhered to the lore dispersed and server populations then began to plummet. The players who stuck with the game did so only because they enjoyed player versus player combat, not because they cared about the lore.

Highlight

Frequently in the first few years of the game's existence, developers would hold events (typically referred to as "FC [feature character] events") where a god would supposedly be returning. When players and guilds arrived at the location, they would typically find out that it was merely a pretender, or worse, a trap coordinated by one of the developers representing a particular god's champion and all guilds loyal to that god. Above average items were often up for grabs and, most importantly, the story was advanced. When players went to the events they wondered if Shadowbane would make an appearance or if this time, it would actually be one of the gods returning to the world. Players truly felt they had agency and that they were a part of a vibrant world whose storyline they could

affect. Even though no god ever surfaced, players knew that the developers at Wolfpack had a plan for the storyline, and that eventually the truth will emerge.

Critical Reception

Reviews for Shadowbane averaged around 75, which is not altogether surprising given the steep investment in the premise before one can truly enjoy the game. Most reviewers lauded Wolfpack for being extremely ambitious and avoiding the level treadmill, since Shadowbane was the type of game one could master in a few weeks. However, nearly every reviewer blasted the game for its technical issues and lack of things to do outside of fighting other players.

Gamespy gave the game an 80, saying, “If the idea of politics, sieges and large-scale warfare in your MMORPG appeal to you, and you’re willing to wait out the stability and lag issues, Shadowbane may be just the game you’re looking for.” However, Computer Games Magazine was less kind with their score of 70 in which the reviewer stated, “The player guild experience is the Shadowbane experience. Get involved with a good one and depth of gameplay becomes clear. Get involved with a bad one and you’ll never get past the same old monster farming you’ve seen before.” Both reviews hit the mark perfectly – even if the game is perfect for an individual player, technical issues and the possibility of wasting away in a bad guild that cares little about the storyline could mean that an otherwise exhilarating experience is lost.

Lessons

- Allowing the player to make choices is by far the most important aspect of the game. There is no restriction placed on a player to adhere to the lore, but most choose to do so anyway because of the depth of the story. Forcing the player to worship a particular god because of the race or class they picked would have been counterproductive – who wants to follow or fight for a god they do not believe in?
- Technical issues at the beginning of the game, especially related to server lag, killed the game. Shadowbane was a top 10 best selling PC game at launch but most players did not last more than a month due to various technical frustrations. Shadowbane was a game ahead of its time and would have benefitted from a longer development period.
- The inherent threat of dying and losing one’s city was an extreme adrenaline rush. In other games, like World of Warcraft, death does not mean very much so players do not take much pride in winning or losing.
- FC events were an exciting and easy way to get players interested in the lore. Players who had no interest in fantasy suddenly found themselves poring over the story of the Age of Kings to decide who they would support if a particular god were to return. The immediacy of the possibility that events might occur that could change the entire political landscape made every action and decision more interesting. Players wanted to log on to find out what happens next.

Summation

MMORPGs today mostly follow a level treadmill format, where the highest goal is to attain items and wealth. In Shadowbane, items and wealth were nearly worthless; the only thing that mattered was power and respect. Players familiar with the lore were extremely important in the community, even if they were poor fighters in game. The concept of having a game centered on player versus player combat is unknown in today's MMORPG landscape, partly because forerunners like Guild Wars that try to focus purely on that competitive aspect experience little success. Eventually players will get bored with killing each other; they need to have some impetus that makes it interesting enough for them to continue. Shadowbane found that impetus by involving players in the storyline and making them feel as if they had real agency in the events that occur within the world.