

Game Narrative Review

Game Title: Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn

Platform: PC

Genre: Role-Playing Game

Release Date: September 24, 2000

Developer: BioWare

Publisher: Black Isle Studios, Interplay Entertainment

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: James Ohlen (Director of Writing and Design), Kevin Martens (Lead Designer)

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Overview

Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn picks up where the first Baldur's Gate left off. The plot in Baldur's Gate II can not be adequately explained without knowledge of the events of Baldur's Gate I. In Baldur's Gate I, the player takes the role of an avatar of the player's choosing. The Player Character is an orphan, and the ward of Gorion, a scholar in the library town of Candlekeep. The Player Character hurries out of town, where Gorion is killed by a man in armor. The Player Character then embarks on a series of quests, like solving an iron shortage, to find this man in armor. As the player discovers, the man in armor is the player's half-brother, and the player's father is Bhaal, the god of Murder. This is where the first game ends.

When Baldur's Gate II starts, the player is locked in a cage in an underground dungeon, held by a sorcerer known as Irenicus. Once the player escapes, they are in a very non-linear world, but there are several events that must happen in order to complete the game. As the player escapes, Imoen, the Player Character's childhood friend, is taken into custody by the Cowled Wizards. The Player Character must side with either a band of thieves or vampires in order to find her and get her back. To do this, the Player Character travels through several exotic locations such as an underwater city and an island city-state. In the process of retrieving Imoen, the Player Character's soul is stolen by Irenicus, and it is revealed that Imoen's soul was stolen by Irenicus' sister, the vampire Bodhi. After this revelation comes another: that Imoen is the Player Character's half-sister, and also the daughter of Bhaal. Once Imoen is retrieved, the Player Character must hunt down and kill Irenicus to get his soul back. This mission leads the character to an elvish city, where the player kills Irenicus. However, because Irenicus has the Player Character's soul, they are both dragged down into Hell, where the Player Character must defeat Irenicus again.

Characters

Throughout the Player Character's journey throughout the world, several NPCs can join his or her party. Each of these NPC has a detailed back-story and intricate side-quests, but only the plot-related characters are listed here.

- **PLAYER CHARACTER** – The protagonist, and the child of Bhaal, the god of Murder. This does not necessarily equate the character with evil acts, however. The player is completely in control of the actions he or she takes throughout the course of the game. The Player Character's half-sister is Imoen. The attributes and traits of the Player Character are created by the player at the start of the game.
- **IMOEN** – Imoen is an orphan, like the Player Character, and grew up in Candlekeep as well. Imoen is a thief, and an aspiring mage as well. She is peppy and inspiring, as she was in Baldur's Gate I. However, after suffering days in a wizard's prison, her personality is darker. The vampire Bodhi has taken Imoen's soul for herself, in order to become a god.
- **JON IRENICUS** – Irenicus is a powerful sorcerer, and he is insanely ambitious. The Player Character is at the mercy of Irenicus at the game's start, and chases him down for the rest of the game, trying to guess the mage's plot. Irenicus plans on stealing the Player Character's soul, which contains part of the soul of a dead god, and using that soul to become a god himself. Once the Player Character escapes Irenicus' prison, he makes plans to use Imoen's soul, instead. The player finds out later that Irenicus is an elf, but was kicked out of his society because of his dark ways. He is known as "the Exile" to the elves that remember him.
- **BODHI** – Bodhi is Irenicus' sister, who has become a vampire. She resides underneath the graveyard district of Athkatla, and she leads a coven of vampires. She offers her services to the Player Character to find Imoen, but it is a trap intended to aid her brother. Once Irenicus has stolen the Player Character's soul, she inherits the soul of Imoen, in order to become a god herself.
- **SHADOW THIEVES** – The Shadow Thieves are an alternate faction wanting to help the Player Character find Imoen, but their interests are in money alone. The Shadow Thieves run the Docks District of Athkatla, and control the nefarious crime life of the city.
- **COWLED WIZARDS** – The "magic police" of Amn, who arrest Irenicus and Imoen as the PC leaves Irenicus' dungeon. The first half of the game is spent trying to recover Imoen from their hold, but it is revealed later that Irenicus is taken charge of the order from the inside.
- **SULDANESSELLAR** – The elvish city where the game wraps up. This is the city that Irenicus and Bodhi are banished from before the game starts. The leader of these elves is Ellesime, who helps fight against Irenicus in the game's penultimate battle.
- **atos** – The player avatar; he is former instrument of Ares, the god of war. He has now turned against Ares with the support of the other Olympian gods, and seeks
- **YOSHIMO** – A bounty hunter from a far-away land, who joins the protagonist's party even before the player escapes the dungeon. Yoshimo is dashing and witty, and has a ruthless sense of efficiency. At the same time that Imoen is rescued, it is

revealed, if Yoshimo is in the party, that he was a plant from the beginning, by Irenicus, to make sure that the player makes it to that point.

Breakdown

The narrative in Baldur's Gate II is a very interesting one, in that the motives for the character are dependent on how the player plays the game. For example, if the player tries to help everyone and lead a noble life, the story becomes one of good vs. evil, where the character must track down the evil wizard and defeat him. This story is tried-and-true in the world of gaming, and the player can go down this path if they want. However, the player can also choose to embrace the Player Character's lineage as the child of the God of Murder, and track down Irenicus in order to get more powerful and reclaim the protagonist's soul. The story then becomes one of revenge and fury. The tone for this story can range anywhere between these two, but the primary indicator as to how the player wants the story to unfold occurs in a dream sequence. As the character rests, they are occasionally visited by Irenicus in their dreams. In one sequence, Irenicus offers the Player Character the power of Bhaal. The player can then respond with either an acceptance of evil powers or a refusal to use them.

One of the great things about this story is that the player feels that they are in complete control of the story. In almost all conversations with NPCs, the player has 3 or more responses, ranging from heroic to calculating to insane. This system works very well, except for the few occasions where a discerning player can tell that any response they chose would lead to getting the same line from the NPC. Also, at some points the dialogue options all seemed tailored to a certain end. Some conversations must end in combat, no matter what the intentions of the player are.

There are several twists and turns in the storyline, beginning with the second the player leaves the first dungeon. Imoen, who was with the player through the entire first game, is taken from the party forcibly. This will come as a shock to the player, especially if the player has played Baldur's Gate I, because Imoen is the very first NPC to join the party in that game as well. Another twist comes when it is revealed that Imoen is also a child of Bhaal. Yoshimo's betrayal is, perhaps, the most devastating of them all, because he is such an important member of the party up to that point. Yoshimo is a thief, and therefore provides several very important functions that only thieves can offer. Unless the Player Character is a thief, the player only has two other options of NPCs to fill this essential role. These options are Jan Jansen, an annoying thief/mage, or Nalia, an even more annoying thief/mage. Because these characters are not full thieves, Yoshimo is the best answer to fill the role in the party. In this way, the developers have made a good chance that this twist will be revealed.

Though Baldur's Gate II is non-linear in most areas, there are several choke points that the player must accomplish. Escaping the first dungeon is obviously the first one. After this, the next thing the player must do is hire the services of either Bodhi's vampires or the Shadow Thieves. Each of these factions will give the player different quests, but they all lead to the prison where Imoen is kept. After this, the player must go through an underground city and then to confront Bodhi in her lair. The player then fights Irenicus at Suldanessellar, then again in Hell.

Strongest Element

The single best story element Baldur's Gate II is how the player chooses to react to the fact that their father is a god of murder. Whether the player revels in it or fights against their heritage changes the entire tone of the game. In most games where the player has complete control over the attributes and fighting style of the character, the customization is limited to combat preferences or spell knowledge. In this game, even though the back story is the same from game to game, the player can shape how their character views the world, and their interactions with others can even change those characters, as well.

Unsuccessful Element

One element in the game that could have been removed is the character of Bodhi. Her relationship with the main antagonist, Irenicus, seems a little contrived and redundant. Irenicus is enough of a villain that his relationship with a vampire sister doesn't do much to make him less likeable. If anything, Irenicus seems less evil in his attempts to ascend his sister to godhood beside him. From what the player understands about Irenicus, he is ultimately selfish, so sharing a godhood, even with his sister, seems out of character for him. Bodhi does not have any integral part in the main plot, and may have been a stronger character had she not been a sister to Irenicus. A vampire queen that tries to hunt down the soul of a dead god is more menacing than a vampire queen who is waiting for her brother to do the work for her. Perhaps her relationship with Irenicus was intended to humanize Irenicus, to make the player feel some sympathy for him, but it seems out of sorts to humanize a character who, in all other facets, is shown to be purely evil and selfish.

Highlight

The most memorable scene in Baldur's Gate II that stands out for me was Yoshimo's betrayal. This came as a shot to the heart for me, as the character that I had trusted from the start turned on me. This character, whom I had relied on from the second screen of gameplay. He is especially endearing because he is such a versatile character, and when I was in a tough spot, I could always count on some of Yoshimo's tricks to get me out. In a big showdown with Irenicus, however, it is revealed that Yoshimo was hired by Irenicus to spy on me and lead me to this confrontation. The first time this happened to me I was astounded. I could not believe that an NPC would betray me. The hardest part about this betrayal, though, was how apologetic Yoshimo was for his actions. He asked that his heart be brought to a temple of Ilmater, the god of suffering, for forgiveness. After I slew him, I did exactly what he asked, and I forget what the in-game reward was, but the real reward was in forgiving Yoshimo for his betrayal. When I play this game even today, I keep Yoshimo in my party, even though I know he will turn on me. This moment is the most touching and shocking moments in the game for me.

Critical Reception

Review 1

Source: IGN.com <<http://pc.ign.com/articles/163/163437p1.html>>

Reviewer: Erik Peterson

Game Score: 9.4/10

This review makes a good point at the consequences of some of the player's actions. The comment made on how sometimes there is no "right" or "wrong" course of action leads to the player asking "what would my character do?" This is how story should be implemented in a game, so that the player feels that have control of how and why the player does what they do. Dialogue was a very important part of Baldur's Gate I, and catch-phrases from the first game are still in the second. All of the dialogue is written for the player to read, and only some important lines actually have spoken dialogue. The conversations with characters feel natural, and there are some NPCs you love, and some you love to hate.

Review 2

Source:GameSpot.com <www.gamespot.com/pc/rpg/baldursgate2shadowsofamn.html>

Reviewer: Greg Kasavin

Game Score: 9.2/10

This review also has several good comments relating to the story of Baldur's Gate II. One issue that hasn't been addressed is the opening level of the game, and how disjointed it feels from the rest of the game. Events occur within this level that seem to have no explanation. Clones are running around, thieves are trying to kill the player, and dwarves are forging weapons for no apparent reason. The clones and dwarves are given very shallow explanations, and never reoccur in the game. The thieves are explained later, and the foreshadowing in the first dungeon is just the right amount.

A second point worth mentioning is how detailed each character is. There are 16 characters available to join the party, and each has different reactions to your actions. As this review mentioned, sometimes people replay the game just to experience new characters. This is not only because characters interact with the player in different ways, ranging from sidequests to potential alignment-altering romances, but also because each character interacts with each other differently. If you have a party with some good characters and some evil ones, the two sides may start openly attacking each other, and it will not stop until one is dead. Also, characters may leave the party if they find the player's actions disagreeable.

Finally, this review mentioned how clear the quests are, compared to Baldur's Gate I. This is a very good comment, which effects how the story unfolds. In the first game, a player could roam around for hours trying to decide where they needed to go next. In Baldur's Gate II, it is always clear where the player needs to go and why they must go there. Because the player has knowledge of what they need to do next, the story can be revealed to the player at a pace of the player's choosing.

Lessons

(What can be learned about game writing, characterization, story, narrative design, or other related elements from this game? What lessons – positive or negative – can be extracted and then applied to future game development? List as many as needed. Each lesson should be supported by examples from within the game.)

- Character interaction is very important to players
 - Some players replay all 200+ hours of the game just to see how new characters interact. There are romances between the player and Anomen, Aerie, Viconia, and Haer'dalis, which encourages many playthroughs.
- Let the player feel in control of the story
 - The player can be on a quest for revenge or redemption, depending on conversation choices.
- The player's most valuable possessions may be the characters themselves
 - Losing an important character, such as in Yoshimo's betrayal or Imoen being captured by wizards, can make the player feel a sense of loss, and strive hard to get it back.

Summation

In conclusion, Baldur's Gate II is a valid candidate for analysis because of its detailed characters, compelling plot, and the player's contribution to the story. This is a game that can be played dozens of times without getting stale, in no small part to the interactions with characters and their interactions between themselves. This game proves that having a character with a strongly good or evil backstory doesn't make the character black or white. Just because the protagonist is the child of a god of murder doesn't equate them with evil, but it is only the player's actions that make this possible. In this game are moments that make you cry in victory, or in rage at a devilish character, or even feel proud at making the right decision, but it is completely up to the player to decide how the story is viewed.