

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: *Dragon Age: Origins*
Platform: Xbox 360
Genre: RPG
Release Date: November 3rd, 2009
Developer: BioWare
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Brent Knowles

Overview

Dragon Age is centered on a player-created protagonist who is quite suddenly shoved into the world of the Grey Wardens, a group of mercenary-like soldiers which act apart from the kingdom and are called upon in times of great need. Not only are you thrust into a life which you had not intended, it also turns out that you are now in the center of a great war with the Darkspawn... and only you can save Ferelden from the Blight.

With six different origin stories as well as many major interactions with the characters you recruit to help you, *Dragon Age* is an experience that is never the same twice over. It is these character and decisional innovations that make this a truly great narrative-driven game.

Characters

While the list of *Dragon Age* characters runs long, there are a few choice NPCs which are vital to gameplay and are the catalyst to many different decisions you will make throughout the game.

- **Main Protagonist** – This character varies, as it is one you create at the beginning of the game. You choose from 3 different races, 3 different classes, and 2 genders to start off. Each of these effects gameplay quite a lot, especially depending on your race. For example, Elves are quite frowned upon by most of society, so your character may not be treated as well in certain areas of Ferelden.
- **Dog** – Yes, a dog. Now as far as character development goes, your dog really has none, because he loves you always. Why I think it's relevant to mention him is because of the level of attachment you can have to this mutt. There is an optional

quest in the beginning in which a kennel master asks you to find an herb to cure a sick Mabari (war dog). If you do this, the dog is cured and seemingly nothing comes of it – until later. While traveling away from the destroyed Grey Warden encampment you come across the dog that, because of your gesture, remembers who you are and becomes a tried and true companion that you can even name. Not to mention, he can fight in your party as well!

- **Alistair** – The charismatic young bastard of late King Maric Theirin, half-brother to King Cailan Theirin. Your protagonist meets Alistair during your journey to become a Grey Warden. Alistair is sarcastic and snide at times, but is immensely loyal and has high moral standards. These standards may be tested, as some of the choices you make will either make Alistair angry with or happy with you. He is also one of the companions that have a chance to be a love interest, which is always spicy to have within a narrative.
- **Leliana** – A lady of the chantry, the very religious Leliana may be obtained in the first village you go to. Her past is dark, full of stealing and persuasion, but you discover that she has turned a new leaf since traveling from Orlais (More of her story is revealed in the DLC Leliana’s Song, which is an interesting and informative story-line that expounds fully upon her past). She is an optional character to recruit to your group, but if you do she has the chance to become a love interest as well as challenges your moral integrity with the decisions that you make within the game.
- **Morrigan** – Morrigan is the daughter of Flemeth, the Witch of the Wilds. You meet this brash and pretentious witch during your journey into the Wilds to become a Grey Warden. Her mother effectively saves your life later when the Grey Wardens come under attack from the Darkspawn. In an effort to rid herself of her pestering daughter, Flemeth offers Morrigan’s assistance to you. Being the complete opposite of Leliana, Morrigan’s moral integrity is blurry, and you will get by with less than savory decisions with her in your party. She is also a candidate to be a love interest.
- **Zevran** – Love interest number four, as well as the Orlesian assassin who tries to kill you under the order of Loghain Mac Tir. His wit is only surpassed by his cunning and deft use of dual-blades. This rogue may be persuaded to join your team if you spare his life after thwarting his assassination attempt. With a tongue of silver and quick hands for lock-picking, he is a welcome addition to make questing easier. Plus, his passes at you are quite amusing in conversation.
- **Loghain Mac Tir** – I mention this character, as he is a vital part of the entire story as well as a secret companion in the game. Loghain is a hailed war hero who saved Ferelden long ago, but it was discovered that he sabotaged the Grey Wardens by not sending in reinforcements against the Darkspawn. Thus, causing King Cailan’s death in the beginning of the game. If you show him mercy near the end of the game, he can become a powerful (yet, rather annoying and pompous)

ally. Despite his flaws, Loghain is probably the most diverse character available to you. In his mind, he was doing the fair thing, and though many see him as a monster, he still continues to do what he feels is morally correct. You are lead to believe he is mad with power, but a deeper understanding shows that he is only concerned for the welfare of his country.

Breakdown

War causes many conflicts within a country, and it is not just tactical decisions that must be made. Cities must decide whether they will round up their troops and in some cases, some must be convinced to help out. A general premise of your situation: Only two Grey Wardens left (you and Alistair) and an entire Blight to conquer. Not only is that a difficult task, but to top it off, the rest of Ferelden does not even know what is happening. You are given four quests, which you can do in any order. Help the Dalish Elves, the Arl of Redcliffe, the Dwarves, and the Mages of the Circle. These four sets of people have ancient contracts with the Grey Wardens to help in time of need and you must help out everyone in some way or another before they will assist you. Story is conveyed through these quests as well as the characters you acquire along the way. The game does a magnificent job of allowing you to learn about the world at your own pleasure. You may learn things through characters, and so by recruiting the ones you can, you stand to gain the most knowledge. Though, to counteract that, there is nothing vital that you miss from not recruiting any certain optional character. Aside from gaining knowledge, recruits to your party allow for all choices to be meaningful depending on whose good side you want to be on. If someone with a high moral integrity is in your party, such as Alistair, and you make a decision to kill an innocent or something of the like, their happiness with you will go down. This makes it harder for you to communicate with them, and will prevent a love interest from working out if you make too many upsetting decisions. There is also the option of giving gifts and doing side quests for your party members. This adds a nice depth to each character's development, as it is fun to learn about who you're traveling with. Lastly, throughout the entire world are sparkling objects which you can pick up and/or examine to obtain codex entries that allow you to learn more about the world around you. The game also keeps tabs on conversations you've had, which is handy for making sure you don't have to remember what's going on just from your own head.

Strongest Element

What impressed me most about the game was the interesting way you can use conversation to learn more about the characters. For example, you may speak to Morrigan and straight out insult her, ask her questions about shapeshifting magic, or ask about her mother. If the answers chosen by you please the NPC, their friendliness towards you will increase. Upon Morrigan enjoying your conversation enough, she eventually teaches you shapeshifting magic if you are a mage. Also, for every character there is a side quest you can do which will earn you major points and an opportunity for deeper and more meaningful conversations.

Unsuccessful Element

To be honest, I might be a bit biased on this, as the most unsuccessful element to me is the Circle of Magi quest. Here you help the Mages exterminate the abominations that have crossed over from the Fade (the realm from which magic and demons originate). Along with being my least favorite quest to do in the game, it really has a lot of pointlessness which could have been avoided. Once in the Fade, you have to go through 5 different areas to gain abilities to access other areas. You are alone, as an abomination separates you from your group, but can save them all (adding a considerable amount of time to gameplay) or you can attempt to go through the whole thing on your own. Overall, the story in that quest is conveyed rather poorly and there is *so* much to do that it really convolutes what is happening in the narrative.

Highlight

Hands down the best twist and quite a gut-wrenching ending would be the highlight. Since this is a decision-driven game, it is easy to conclude that there are multiple endings. One of which you find out that a Grey Warden can sacrifice himself to kill the Arch Demon and end the Blight. If you let Loghain join your party, Alistair leaves in a rage. Once turned into a Grey Warden, Loghain may sacrifice himself to slay the Arch Demon. The character you love to hate, getting the justice you wanted as well as completing an act in which he feels redeemed. It was the most satisfying ending with a twinge of melancholy from Alistair's departure, as he was with you the entire game.

Critical Reception

Overall, *Dragon Age: Origins* was very well accepted by the gaming community. There was a unanimous agreement of the immersive narrative and rich plot line as well as recognition for amazing character development.

Reviewer Jeff Haynes from IGN stated, "By the end of the game, your hero will feel like a true legendary Grey Warden with a full complement of abilities to destroy the Darkspawn." After explaining all the awesome choices you get at the beginning of the game. IGN gave the game an 8.7 out of 10, and GameSpot and 8.5, both highly looked upon scores. Kevin VanOrd of GameSpot had much to say as well, boasting of the "intricate, involved story-telling" saying, "It's a lengthy, intricate, and thoroughly entertaining adventure that's easy to fall in love with." There was not one review I read that looked poorly upon the game, and rightly so. With its amazing narrative design, no one with a healthy love for RPGs would scoff at this immersive and well thought out game.

Lessons

- Good narrative doesn't need to be carried by only cut scenes and codex, but can be beautifully conveyed just through conversation with the members of your group/other NPCs.

- Convoluted quest lines, does not an RPG make. Sometimes there's too much action in lieu of receiving information which can be detrimental, especially if the player is confused because of it.
- Side-quests are a great way to convey character development and learn more about the NPCs whilst still being able to kill things and feel useful.

Summation

Dragon Age: Origins is, hands down, my favorite game to date. That alone gives it the merit to be written about, for what better analysis could be written than one by someone who is in love with the game, flaws and all? With its cornucopia of depth and immersion, this game will not let you go until you're done. And, really, isn't that what we all want? Games are there to take away from our world and thrust us unceremoniously into another until we believe with all our hearts that we're a hero. *Dragon Age* does that in such a wonderful way. It's a narrative experience that can be enjoyed multiple times over and be just as exciting every time. That, my friends, is an ideal and well put together video game with exquisite narrative design.