

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Dreamfall: The Longest Journey
Platform: PC, Xbox
Genre: Adventure
Release Date: April 17 2006 (NA)
Developer: Funcom
Publisher: Aspyr (NA)
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Ragnar Tornquist

Overview

The Longest Journey story began with a young girl named April Ryan who lived in the industrial world of Stark. She lived as an art student before discovering herself to be a ‘Shifter’ who was capable of moving between Stark and the parallel magic-dominated world of Arcadia. The player must help April restore the essential Balance between the two worlds or else both worlds would end. *The Longest Journey* is not a prerequisite to understanding the plot in the sequel.

Dreamfall: The Longest Journey takes place ten years after the events of the first game and focuses on three characters and their connection to mysterious changes occurring in Stark and Arcadia. The main storyline follows Zoë, a resident of Stark, who becomes involved in a conspiracy involving the disappearance of her ex-boyfriend and a mysterious girl in white who continuously tells her to help April Ryan. Meanwhile, in Arcadia, April Ryan leads a band of rebels against the Empire of Azadi and the loyal soldier Kian Alvane who is trying to assassinate her.

Characters

- **Zoë Castillo** – The protagonist of *Dreamfall* and a girl of mixed Spanish-Chinese descent who begins the game feeling lost about herself, her ambitions, and goals in her life. While looking for her missing ex-boyfriend, Reza Temiz, she becomes involved in a large conspiracy involving the powerful WATCorp and a mysterious girl in white by the name of Faith who constantly tells her to “Save April Ryan”. Within the adventure, she finds her inner strength and her purpose as a ‘Dreamer’.
- **April Ryan** – The second playable character of *Dreamfall* and the protagonist of the first game, *The Longest Journey*. After the chaos in Stark, April escaped into Arcadia where she became a very different person. She became a hardened warrior among a group of

rebels known as Raven. Her personality change, loss of faith, and refusal to face her past created a block in her psyche and she lost her ability to travel between worlds as a 'Shifter'. She now seeks to understand what her new role and purpose are since her adventure was completed years ago.

- **Kian Alvane** – The third playable character of Dreamfall and an Azadi soldier to the powerful empire from the Northlands of Arcadia. His task is to go to Marcuria, a city in Arcadia recently conquered by the Azadi, to assassinate the Rebel leader known as Scorpion. He unknowingly encounters April, mistaking her for someone else, and begins to question the Azadi's justification of the changes made to the once free Marcuria.
- **Reza Temiz** – Zoë's ex-boyfriend and investigative journalist for *The Hand That Bites*. He started to investigate the darker side of WATICorp where he met Damion Cavanaugh. Both teamed up to expose the conspiracy and dangers of WATICorp's Dreamer Console aka Project Alchera but he has since gone missing after asking Zoë for a favor involving picking up sensitive information. He only reappears at the end of the game where Zoë tries to warn her dad "That's not Reza".
- **Helena Chang** – A mysterious Asian woman closely tied to Project Alchera. She seems to know Zoë but does not stay around to answer any questions regarding her past or affiliation with the Castillos. She knows the identity of Faith and may know more about Zoë than she is willing to tell.
- **Olivia DeMarco** – Best friend to Zoë Castillo and Reza Temiz. She runs an electronic shop in Casablanca and hooks Zoë up with the latest gadgets to lock pick into buildings. She is in constant contact with Zoë during her adventures and updates her with clues regarding Reza's whereabouts.
- **Damien Cavanaugh** – An employee of WATICorp who is trying to expose Project Alchera and the consequences of using DreamNet with Reza Temiz. He becomes romantically interested in Zoë and does whatever he can to help her.
- **Faith** – A mysterious little girl dressed in white who appears to Zoë on various screens throughout Dreamfall. She constantly warns Zoë to "save April." She has connections to the DreamNet as well as the ability to help Zoë travel between Stark and Arcadia.
- **Emma and Charlie** – Both are old friends of April Ryan from the first game. They have lost contact with April since she ran to Arcadia but they still hope to find her. Emma still believes April to be alive and well in Arcadia while Charlie is a little more skeptical about Arcadia's existence. Charlie and Emma do their best to aid Zoë in finding April and uncovering the story that Reza was working on.
- **Alvin Peats** – The Founder and CEO of WATICorp. He is a large slug-looking man sitting in a bath of liquid while hooked up to various cables and pipes of technology to extend his life. He connects directly to DreamNet and has his 'eyes and ears' everywhere

since he is physically blind and deaf. He hunts down Zoë with the aim to study her because something blocks him from “stealing her dreams”.

- **WATICorp** – One of the most powerful corporations in Stark. The company specializes in computers, software, and household robots. Their dangerous DreamNet project has very dark intentions and the company is ruthless enough to kill people who get in the way.

Breakdown

Dreamfall: The Longest Journey continues the story of its prequel where the Earth consists of two parallel worlds: one of magic called Arcadia and one of science called Stark. April Ryan traveled between these two worlds with her unique ability called “Shifting” and soon became the key to restoring the Balance between the two worlds by finding the next Guardian. April Ryan successfully restored the Balance by rescuing and returning the 13th Guardian to his duties and she disappeared into Arcadia.

Soon after her disappearance, a catastrophic event took place back on Stark simply known as the “Collapse”. The details of this event are unexplained but the chaos caused the loss of advanced travel and communications with various parts of the world.

Years later, after Stark is able to repair part of its advanced technology, the game begins with a narration by Zoë Castillo, one of the main three protagonists. Zoë lies in a coma and recounts the events that led her to her current fate.

The story of *Dreamfall* is broken up into 13 chapters with a prologue and epilogue. The story unfolds mostly through dialogue and character interactions within the world and people in them. Players move around a very set area with limited interactions between inventory management puzzles and matching puzzles. Most importantly, players gain vast amounts of information about the area they are currently exploring through the perspective of the character they are playing. Zoë may look at an object and react differently to it in comparison to April. Character interactions like these become the most powerful element of the narrative and reveal what the characters are thinking to give the player a more in-depth understanding of them.

The main narrative and theme of the story revolves around what Ragnar calls the “Faith Model”. This is where characters experience various things influencing their faith. All three of the main protagonists have a common inner conflict regarding their faith and they approach the problem in very different ways. Zoë begins her story as a recent college dropout who has lost her ambition and direction in life. April finds herself lost in her purpose since the Balance does not need her to fix it anymore. Kian’s faith falters and he is lost when his eyes open to the idea that his people may not be saviors to the Marcurians, whom he sees as savages. All the major characters develop differently in correlation to the Faith model but each embarks on a hero’s journey. Zoë reaches disillusionment and, through the act of destroying the girl in white, she regains her own faith in herself. Kian also reaches disillusionment but experiences a transformation after a spiritual death of his faith when he sees what his people have done to the Marcurians. He then seeks to fix it to what he believes is right. April, on the other hand, falls into hopelessness when she loses faith in herself and refuses to help Zoë. This model revolves around a character’s journey of self-discovery and their experiences and interactions help them grow as individuals.

Throughout this game, Zoë, April, Kian, and the player all find purpose. They find that there is something bigger than they are and that they have the power to do something. This purpose is what drives them and the player, to do what they do and how they proceed through the interwoven plot. It draws the player deeper into the narrative and only the player understands how well the characters are working together and the ripple effect of everyone's actions. The parallelism between Zoë and April working between Stark and Arcadia on their own adventures may appear linear and personal but just as the worlds are closely tied, so are the two girls' journeys and ultimate goals. Zoë hunts down clues for her ex-boyfriend's location in Stark and discovers a villainous brainwashing plot while April searches for answers in Arcadia regarding who needs her help and discovers part of the origins of the brainwashing plot taking over Stark.

Dreamfall: The Longest Journey may appear linear in gameplay and while that is true, it has a very complex story to tell and uses careful pacing to immerse the player without overwhelming them with information. The game has several stages of interactivity to segment the pacing such as watching a cutscene, exploring, stealth and combat. While the cutscenes and exploration elements are a highpoint of the game, the stealth and combat fall flat. The stealth and combat sections are expected to be tense and action-oriented such as when Zoë is about to be caught or when April is diving into battle. There is a little strategy required within each of them and are hardly challenging enough to give the player a sense of accomplishment. They do benefit the game's pacing between the cutscenes and the bombardment of information given to the player but those two mechanics can cause players to lose interest or view it as an inconvenience.

This sci-fi adventure game comes together in a way that is enthralling and engrossingly interesting. The characters feel authentic and are able to reveal themselves and their motivations through unique fully voiced dialogue. The story of all three protagonists come together and form one large, complex, but cohesive and very memorable adventure of faith and self-discovery.

Strongest Element

The strongest aspect of *Dreamfall: The Longest Journey* is the strong storyline and enthralling character interactions. It is a compelling interwoven narrative and the depth of the denizens within Marcuria and Stark draw players in to learn more about each world and the changes that have occurred due to electrical disruption or civil chaos. This not only affects characters that Zoë, April, and Kian interact with, but the mythical creatures they pass by on the street as well. The element of discovery is what grabs the player's attention and the game delivers intricate details and unique dialogue through the thoughts of each character observing their environment. The mythos created within this game world feels real and the more a player explores, the more the game rewards them with new creatures, characters, and information about where the player is, what creature they are speaking to, and why that character has their unique beliefs and motivations. Sometimes the game does not provide all the information, which leaves the player open to draw theories from the little information they possess. For example, two characters come across a magical creature called a Samare at different points in the game. Both characters do not know much about the Samare but each say something different such as April saying that the Samare generally dislike the sea while Kian notes that they are not native to his homeland. This small bit of information welcomes the player to fill in the blank and instills player creativity and curiosity that pulls them deeper into the world to discover more.

Unsuccessful Element

Dreamfall gameplay, in comparison to its predecessor, integrated more sneaking and action-oriented sequences. The problem with these elements is that they did not present enough of a challenge. The sneaking simply involved keeping distance from the enemy and avoiding walking on noisy obstacles such as broken glass. The lack of an additional ability or mechanic, such as the ability to hide in the shadows or crawl under spaces to avoid detection, makes the game fall flat. The action segments integrated into the game involved fighting by clicking the left button for light attacks, right button for heavy attacks, and pressing spacebar to block. Players usually used heavy attacks to defeat enemies that results in a very imprecise, lackluster, and overly simplified fighting system. There was a change from *The Longest Journey's* odd inventory logic puzzles to a more simplified matching game and limited inventory with overly simplified solutions. There is no chance for the players to challenge themselves to overcome an obstacle and thus the use of more intricate increasingly complex puzzles would have added another involved layer to the game.

Highlight

The highlight of the narrative is when the player as Kian Alvane and April Ryan run into each other without knowing who the other is. There is a tense moment where the possibility of a fight erupting between the two arises but the interaction takes a more interesting and unexpected turn. The characters simply talk about how each side sees the results of the occupation by the Azari. April's dialogue is aggressive towards Kian because she identifies him as the heartless invading Azadi and Kian responds by trying to pacify her about his people because they brought improvements to Marcuria such as protection. April answers with hostility that the Marcurian people were imprisoned and his religion wrongfully forced onto them. She leaves after firmly establishing that they are enemies and ignores Kian's suggestion about learning more about each other's worlds to come to an understanding. Kian returns to his task but now with the lingering question in his mind about if his people are really justified in their occupation of Marcuria. This simple interaction tells a lot about the characters and their viewpoints of the world. It helps Kian evolve as a character and open his eyes, as well as open the player's eyes, to the current situation not being as black and white as April and Kian believed it to be. Both Kian and April held their views to be in the right and this scene shows how characters can see themselves as "the good guys" and illustrates how each of them is proceeding down the faith model.

Critical Reception

Dreamfall: The Longest Journey received positive reviews around 75 and up on websites such as Metacritic[1].

Greg Kasavin from Gamespot rated *Dreamfall: The Longest Journey* 8.1 for its "incredibly provocative sci-fi story filled with many memorable characters" as well as its magnificent music, voice acting, and dialogue. He lists the unchallenging and simplistic combat as a negative as well as the rich story leaving the player wanting for more [2].

Charles Onyett from IGN writes that the stealth, fighting, and mini-games for unlocking doors and inventory puzzles as lack luster but shines enormous praises on Dreamfall's story, characters, and environment. He goes on to say "On a whole, every character in the game has a unique voice, a unique world view, and unique character traits, making each conversation or

fleeting quip memorable for what's said and what's not." While the action-oriented mechanics feel underdeveloped, the story is engaging and strengthens the game's unique mythos [3].

Lessons

- **Create memorable characters within strong stories.** Characters in games have a lasting impact on players. They are characters who are remembered, admired, and sometimes who people aspire to be like. Making a character realistic with flaws and yet a strong and growing personality make lasting impressions on players.
- **If there are action-oriented sequences, it should be challenging.** Stealth and combat elements need to create tension and suspense, not slow down the gameplay. If combat is going to be one of the core mechanics, it should be more engaging than just a separate instance and be integrated more to match the flow of the game. Adding more depth an original mechanic or adding a special ability for the player can create a more engaging and challenging experience.
- **Atmosphere is essential for emersion.** Detailed worlds create a more engrossing environment for the player to explore. Sound is a strong part of the atmosphere as well as unique voice acting. Instead of having players read a text box, having a character inform the player what they see and what their viewpoint is on the world enables players to empathize with them and become more enveloped in the presented situation.
- **Drawing in new players while keeping it fresh for the older fans creates a wider audience and a more inviting game.** *Dreamfall: The Longest Journey* and Zoë's adventure tie to the adventures of the prequel game with April Ryan but the game does not assume newcomers even know what happened. Good writing can explain an intricate detailed storyline and draw in new players to form a larger fan base.
- **Minor characters help develop the plot as well as the main.** There are multitudes of characters within *Dreamfall: The Longest Journey*. However, each character is unique and helps build upon the main plot while bringing in their own unique story to make them special. Giving minor characters a voice and an opinion aids the game mood to feel more alive and real rather than just a NPC with an unimportant boring textbox.

Summation

Dreamfall: The Longest Journey is an amazing work of science fiction and fantasy. Ragnar Tornquist has created a complex plot and a vast array of memorable characters living in an immersive and imaginative world that is still growing with an upcoming third game. Fans do not really play the game for the combat, stealth, or puzzles, but for the experience and roller coaster of emotions on this vast adventure of self-discovery and faith. Players uncover for themselves, just as the characters in the game do, the engrossing world of Stark and Arcadia and the unforgettable adventures tied together which is the core focus of the game. It is a worthy sequel to its predecessor and is one of the best adventure games of all time.

References

- 1) *Dreamfall: The Longest Journey*. (2006, April 17). Retrieved from MetaCritic: <http://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/dreamfall-the-longest-journey>
- 2) Kasavin, G. (2006, April 18). *Dreamfall: The Longest Journey Review*. Retrieved from Gamespot: <http://www.gamespot.com/reviews/dreamfall-the-longest-journey-review/1900-6147844/>
- 3) Onyett, C. (2006, April 17). *Dreamfall: The Longest Journey*. Retrieved from IGN: <http://www.ign.com/articles/2006/04/17/dreamfall-the-longest-journey>