

# Game Narrative Review

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**Game Title:** Dragon Age: Origins

**Platform:** PC, Mac, Xbox 360, PS3

**Genre:** RPG

**Release Date:** November 3, 2009 (multiple release dates based on region, platforms)

**Developer:** BioWare

**Publisher:** EA Games

**Creative Director/Lead Narrative Designer:** Brent Knowles

## Overview

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*Dragon Age: Origins* contains a rich narrative constructed with a combination of deep characters, and numerous morally ambiguous choices that have significant impact on the player's experience and the world.

The beginning of the story varies based on six different origins that can be chosen during character creation, which vary in social class and race. The six origins quickly converge with the player character joining the Grey Warden organization. The Grey Wardens' sole purpose is to defend the world of Thedas against the darkspawn, twisted creatures whose only motivation is to destroy the other sentient races. To this end, the Grey Wardens are willing to sacrifice all in order to pursue their objective. The player soon finds himself one of the last Wardens in the area with a difficult task. The country of Ferelden must be saved from a darkspawn army led by a dark dragon known as an arch demon. The player must gather an army of allies of different races and backgrounds to slay the arch demon before Ferelden falls.

## Characters

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Ferelden contains a wide array of characters and factions that constantly alter the world as they pursue their agendas, whether for good or ill. The player character interacts with most of the various factions over the course of the game, and in some cases decides their fate.

### Grey Wardens

This organization formed centuries ago when humanity stood on the verge of annihilation. The first Wardens drank darkspawn blood and sacrificed all to stop the darkspawn tide. The player character represents this faction and succeeds in defeating the darkspawn horde; however the methods to reach this goal remain up to the player.

<sup>35</sup><sub>17</sub> **Player** – The player character varies in race, gender, class, social standing, and even personality depending on the player's preference. Whether the player wants to play noble human berserker or a treacherous elven archer remains open. The character proceeds to become the product of their actions.

<sup>35</sup><sub>17</sub> **Alistair** – the son of a castle servant girl on the verge of swearing his vows as a Templar before Duncan recruited him into the Grey Wardens. Later the player discovers he is the illegitimate son of Maric, the former King Cailan's father, and thus rightful king of Ferelden. He resents his lineage, which explains his lack of desire to lead in any regard. He uses humor to cope with his hardships, but wants to alleviate the suffering of others and strives to do the right thing.

## Loghain's Faction

A group of humans that follow Teyrn Loghain as he strives to maintain "Ferelden's independence" by eliminating anybody he deems a threat, which include the Grey Wardens. His followers' motivations range from thirst for power or simple loyalty to Loghain. Ultimately, the player character disbands this faction through removal of Loghain.

<sup>35</sup><sub>17</sub> **Loghain** – war hero and noble of Ferelden. He leaves King Cailan and the Grey Wardens to die at Ostagar. He promptly declares himself regent and the Grey Wardens' traitors. His primary motivation is to maintain Ferelden's independence, made irrational by his intense hatred of former occupying kingdom Orlais. He generally uses the reasoning "the end justifies the means" when he pursues a reasonable goal with questionable actions. Despite this, he is an inspiring and intelligent leader.

## The Chantry

Following the word of the Maker (God) and his prophet Andraste, the Chantry dominate over human culture as the only religious organization. Anybody they clerics deem to be unholy generally is subject to extermination or subjugation. However, they also assist the impoverished and needy. The player character's main interactions with the Chantry involve completing tasks on the Chantry board for currency as well as selling the clerics holy artifacts.

## **Dalish Elves**

Elven civilization stood among the most advanced in the world, until various human organizations broke the elven civilization. The humans proceeded to enslave the elves. Multiple fragment groups known as the Dalish clans refused to live in servitude and roam the forests attempting to regain what they lost. They nurture a strong disgust of humans in general and avoid them whenever possible. The player character decides the fate of the Ferelden Dalish clan by either assisting them against the werewolves or aiding the werewolves in destroying them. Depending on choice, the Dalish or werewolves will assist the player character during the final battle.

## **Dwarves of Orzammar**

The dwarves maintained a massive underground empire until the darkspawn destroyed all but two cities, one of the two Orzammar. Their society remains strongly bound by tradition, including a rigid caste and religious system. The player character chooses who becomes the next king of Orzammar, and depending on the choice either allows Orzammar to continue using its crumbling system or usher in a new one.

## **Circle of Magi**

The only mage organization considered legal by the Chantry. All magi known to the Chantry must live and study within this conclave, cut off from the rest of the world. Any mage who can't pass the test known as the Harrowing or breaks one of the Chantry's rules is sentenced to death by the Templars, the militant wing of the Chantry. The player character decides the fate of Ferelden's Circle of Magi during its respective part of the main story arc by either saving them from a demon or purging them to insure nothing evil remained. Depending on choice, the magi or Templars will assist the player character during the final battle.

## **Breakdown of Unique Elements**

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The narrative of the game can be found within quests, dialogue, the lore codex, or the environment. The main quest contains the majority of information pertaining to the central plot, and while well written, is similar to several other RPGS. Most of the side quests remain fairly unremarkable and impart unsubstantial insight into the world. While the player can find rich information within the well implemented branching dialogue system, many RPGs feature similar systems. The lore codex remains fairly standard, numerous small articles covering specific topics. The environmental narrative remained limited to some signs and vaguely described quests. The narrative aspects that separate *Dragon Age: Origins* from other RPGs are the

companion approval system, potentially altering companion personality, and its namesake, the origin stories.

While many RPGs have some form of companions and some approval systems, companion approval being influenced by the actions the player character makes within the world remains unique to *Dragon Age: Origins*. A companion's views and beliefs determine whether they approve of the player character actions. The apostate mage Morrigan believes in survival of the fittest, and thus disapproves of charitable acts. On the other hand, Circle of Magi senior enchanter Wynne approves of charitable actions. If a companion's approval drops too low and can't be convinced otherwise, they will leave the party for the rest of the game. This part of the system strongly increases the immersion of the game; however in general the gift portion weakens this effect. The player may give companions gifts to increase loyalty with gifts better relating to the specific companion giving higher approval. For the iconic gifts, such as Alistair's amulet that belonged to his mother, a unique conversation would occur and only strengthens immersion. Most of the general gifts only serve to raise approval without adding further narrative significance, and weaken the strength of the approval system. The other unique aspect of this game's companions is the ability to "harden" a companion. Some companions have unique quest lines that at the end, based on player choice, will change the companions' personalities. In the case of Leliana, hardening her will lead to her being less likely to object to evil actions, alter her opinion of another companion, and adjust future outcomes. The ability to change a companion's personality is unheard of in the RPG genre, and reinforces the game's narrative. The narrative is further empowered by the most unique feature of game, the origin stories.

The origin stories are different beginnings the player chooses during character creation based on race and class. Some of the combinations let the player choose between two different origins, such as with the dwarves and any martial classed elf. The origin chosen influences the narrative throughout the course of the game in small and large ways. An example of a small way occurs during a series of tests, in which one of them contains an apparition whose identity is dependent on the player's origin. Human nobles will encounter their recently deceased father. Most of the smaller ways involves how the world views the player character. An elf will be treated more harshly by the general human populace as most humans view elves as a lesser species. The most significant effect the origin has on the narrative is adding emotional context to predetermined character interaction. An example of this involves the player killing Arl Howe, a subordinate of Teryn Loghain, later during the main story arc. Every player regardless of origin or choice must slay Howe in order to complete the game. However in the human noble origin, Arl Howe betrays the player character's family, kills most of them, and steals your ancestral home. Thus ending Howe becomes a goal of the player character early on as well as adding emotional significance

to the deed. Considering all the positive effects on the game's narrative, the origin stories aren't merely a unique narrative element of *Dragon Age: Origins*, but one of the strongest elements as well.

## Strongest Element

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The strongest element of the game narrative is the scripting system executing the consequences of the player's decisions, as many RPGs merely create an illusion of the player's choice having significance. In retrospect, the majority of the game's decisions have strong gameplay, moral, and/or world changing consequences. One such example involves confronting a demon possessing a young boy. The player can make a deal with the demon, allowing the demon to come back to the boy later, and receives a reward of their choice. These rewards vary from role playing to the powerful blood mage specialization. The other choice is to kill the demon, saving the boy, and receiving no gameplay boost in return. Both paths set an epilogue flag which lead to different futures for the boy once the game is concluded. This decision alone has significant gameplay, moral, and world changing consequences. It is merely one of many made throughout the game. These consequences strengthen the immersion of the overall narrative, making Ferelden all the more real.

## Unsuccessful Element

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Class specializations reduced the immersion of the narrative due to lack of a legitimate reason for how the character learned the specialization without the appropriate knowledge, and potentially compromising character integrity by a character learning an inappropriate specialization. When the player unlocks a new specialization, it is then available to all existing or future characters. Thus, the player could make a new mage and specialize in blood magic without unlocking it within that particular story. It is also possible to save before unlocking a specialization, unlocking it, and reverting back to the previous save. The specialization becomes available but the player didn't suffer any consequences. While it increases convenience for future characters, it reduces player immersion. Certain characters obtaining certain specializations also conflict with the character's identity and or the overall narrative. For example, the companion Wynne hails from Ferelden's Circle of Magi and has an intense mistrust of blood magic. Through the specialization system, Wynne could become a blood mage. However this doesn't make sense based on her character and reduces the character's integrity. The specialization system has the potential to reinforce the narrative; however its implementation produced the opposite effect.

## Highlight

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The strongest moment in the game narrative is when the player slays the arch demon. The cut scene shows either the player or a companion stab the arch demon through the head with a sword. A beam of light emanates from the wound as he/she attempts to remove the blade, and a nova is produced when the blade is removed. The Ferelden army below looks forth in awe and the darkspawn flee. If the player refuses to proceed with a companion's plan involving using a magic ritual to prevent any Warden needing to die, one of the Grey Wardens must sacrifice themselves to slay the arch demon. In that moment, the player or one of his companion sacrifices themselves to save the world. Most RPGs that contain the protagonist or a companion sacrificing themselves for the greater good don't give the player a choice regarding it, which diminishes the emotional power of the moment. Not only does the player have the choice between sacrifice and self preservation, but the game has been preparing the player all game for this moment. When the moment finally comes, the experience is very powerful.

However the other choice somewhat derails the moment as the significance and consequences remain shrouded by uncertainty. Thus unless the player either wants to sacrifice somebody or has scruples involving the other choice, choosing life becomes too easy. While culmination of the player's efforts into this one point remains powerful despite this slight derailment, making the choice more difficult would have further empowered the moment. An already memorable game event would have become unforgettable.

## Critical Reception

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The critical reception to the game was very positive with a Metacritic score of 91. The reviewers generally stated it's one of the best computer role playing games they have seen.

GameSpot gave the game a 95, stating "Incredible storytelling, great characters, and exciting battles are just a few of the things that make this fantasy role-playing game so extraordinary." PC Gamer decided on 92, stating "An outstanding story-driven RPG with fantastic writing, RPG depth and tough tactical combat. It's BioWare's best RPG since Baldur's Gate 2" [Holiday 2009, p.38]. One of the more negative reviews came from Metro GameCentral, stating "The best and worst of BioWare's excesses combine in this competent but unprogressive RPG." Most of the negative comments concerning the game attack the game visuals and AI, not the narrative.

## Lessons

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### Significant and difficult choices

- Effective morally ambiguous choices force the player to examine their beliefs and ponder their choice. This can be strengthened if the player must sacrifice something in the process. Once the player starts pondering, they immediately become more immersed within the world.

### Incorporating player choice

- Adding multiple endings isn't the only way and not even the best way to add more choices for the player. Choice added to the beginning or middle of the story has more impact as the player experiences the consequences of those choices longer.

### Consequences

- Having significant consequences to a player's actions, whether good or bad, helps the player believe he or she has become part of a living world.

### Crafting characters

- Relatable and sympathetic characters help the player become more emotionally invested in the narrative, and stereotypes or shallow main characters only hinder the player in this regard.

### Multiple narrative sources

- Incorporating narrative into as many facets of the game as possible creates a more cohesive and real world.

## Summation

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Dragon Age: Origins is worthy of analysis due to its deep characters, and impactful decisions. All the primary characters have their own motivations, fears, and dreams that impact the world. Very few characters view the world as black or white, and make decisions accordingly. The majority of the decisions the player faces produce significant consequences. These strong elements combine with the story and gameplay to create a believable world the player can immerse themselves in and believe their presence has a significant impact. This becomes more significant as more open world RPGs released preach open freedom with meaningful actions, but merely produce an illusion of it. Without meaningful decisions throughout the narrative, the emotional impact of the game will remain as hollow as the illusion of decision. Focusing on what BioWare accomplished well in Dragon Age: Origins will help RPGs steer away from the trap of these recent games.