

Game Narrative Review

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GameTitle: Dragon Age: Origins
Platform: Xbox 360, Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 3, OS X
Genre: Role-playing game
ReleaseDate: November 3, 2009
Developer: BioWare
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Game Writer/CreativeDirector/NarrativeDesigner: Brent Knowles

Overview

Dragon Age: Origins (henceforth *DAO*) is a narrative-centric role-playing game in which the player endures the trials of Joseph Campbell's monomyth by discovering what it means to be a Grey Warden, by uniting the troubled factions of the kingdom of Ferelden, and by ultimately quelling the Fifth Blight. A Blight is an attempt made by subterranean, orc-like darkspawn and their leader, a powerful dragon-god called an Archdemon, to conquer the world of Thedas. In anticipation of successive Blights, the Order of the Grey Wardens was established solely to keep watch for darkspawn insurrection and to slay these darkspawn-tainted Archdemons whenever they appear.

In the midst of this overarching conflict, the player must also exercise diplomacy and combat racism, sexism, and classism in order to forge peace between the warring factions that would otherwise provide assistance in accordance with Grey Warden treaties. In particular, the challenges surrounding mage recruitment set the stage for the *Dragon Age* series' central conflict between mages and the Templars who ostensibly protect them from possession and themselves. Finally, one of the most remarkable aspects of the game is that it gives the player the unique opportunity to explore multiple types of relationships and expressions of sexuality by way of varied conversation choices that have since become staples of BioWare's RPGs.

The Grey Warden motto elegantly and succinctly expresses the Order's vital role in the world of *DAO* and in successive games in the *Dragon Age* series:

*In Peace, Vigilance. In War, Victory. In Death, Sacrifice.*¹

Characters

- **The Order of the Grey Wardens**

The Maker smiles sadly on his Grey Wardens, so the Chantry says, as no sacrifice is greater than theirs.
-- *DAO* codex

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are taken directly from codex or from character dialogue from games in the *Dragon Age* series.

The Order of the Grey Wardens is a group of highly skilled guardians who are sworn to protect the world of Thedas from darkspawn corruption. After ingesting darkspawn blood as part of their initiation into the Order, Wardens can sense darkspawn whenever they are in close proximity to the creatures. This ritual also forms a mental link between the Wardens and the Archdemon, a connection that assists Wardens with their goal but eventually drives them mad. Although they maintain headquarters in the northern fortress of Weisshaupt, the Wardens are scattered throughout Thedas and thus experience some difficulty with forming a unified front to end the Fifth Blight. Typically a single Grey Warden must sacrifice themselves in order to kill the Archdemon and end a Blight.

1. **The Warden/The Hero of Ferelden** – The player and the main protagonist; they become a member of the Order of the Grey Wardens. It is the Warden's duty to recruit allies to eliminate the darkspawn threat and thereby end the Fifth Blight. The Warden is one of two sexes and one of three races, specializes in multiple methods of combat within one of three classes, and emerges from one of six unique backgrounds. In addition, the Warden's personality and romantic interests are determined by the way that they interact with the world and converse with the people in it.
2. **Duncan** – The player's mentor; he is a human member of the Grey Wardens and the person who conscripts the Hero of Ferelden into the Order. He is wise, skilled, and patient with his fellow Wardens, and he has been a member of the Order for 20 years. Duncan and the conversely Machiavellian Teryn Loghain Mac Tir provided counsel to King Cailan Theirin regarding the Battle of Ostagar, the first major skirmish during the Fifth Blight. Due to Loghain's betrayal, both King Cailan and Duncan were killed in the battle, leaving the Grey Wardens without a leader and the kingdom of Ferelden without a monarch. Thus the intelligent but vicious Loghain takes over as Regent of Ferelden until a suitable replacement can be found; the Grey Warden Alistair may just be the person for the job.
3. **Alistair** – One of the player's traveling companions and most trusted ally; he is a human and a fellow Grey Warden, and he fights alongside the Warden throughout their journey. Because Alistair is the illegitimate son of King Maric, the king's brother-in-law Arl Eamon accepted Alistair as his ward and raised him in the village of Redcliffe, Ferelden's first line of defense. He never knew his mother and is disappointed upon meeting his shallow, bitter half-sister, so he considers Arl Eamon and the Warden to be his only family. With the death of his half-brother King Cailan and the Warden's assistance, Alistair must eventually address his claim to the throne. Although trained as a disciplined Templar warrior, he is easygoing and keeps the party's spirits up with lighthearted jokes, even when the situation seems dire. Because Alistair is heterosexual and heteroromantic (sexually and romantically attracted to the opposite gender), only a female Warden may form a monogamous romantic relationship with Alistair. Should he become king, Alistair may only marry a human noble, although he can maintain a relationship with an elf or dwarven Warden if they have had certain conversations earlier in the adventure.

- **The Circle of Magi**

Magic exists to serve man, and never to rule over him.

Foul and corrupt are they

Who have taken His gift

And turned it against His children.

-- Transfigurations 1: 1-5 (an excerpt from the Chant of Light)

The Circle of Magi is a closed society focused primarily on training and containing mages so as to prevent demon possession and the misuse of magic. Almost every kingdom across Thedas contains at least one Circle, each of which are patrolled by Templars, holy warriors proficient in the art of dispelling

magic. Mages draw their power from the Fade, an otherworldly realm where those who can dream wander and demons prey on the weak. The Circle removes children from their families as soon as it becomes apparent that they can use magic, often beginning their training at a very young age. Through a ritual called The Harrowing, the First Enchanter sends a mage-apprentice into the Fade to combat a demon, and afterwards, the First Enchanter and the Knight-Commander – the head of the Templars in a Circle – determine whether or not that mage-apprentice may continue their training. If the mage-apprentice fails the test, the Templars either kill the mage or perform the Rite of Tranquility, which severs that mage’s connection to the Fade, leaving them devoid of emotion and unable to use magic. Should the Templars lose control of a Circle, they may request permission from the Chantry to perform the Right of Annulment, a complete purge of that Circle so as to protect the rest of the world from possessed mages, known as abominations. Templars and lyrium, a substance that helps mages perform magic and helps Templars reduce the effects of magic, are both controlled by the Chantry, the primary religious organization in Thedas (see **The Chantry** below).

- **The Chantry**

*And so is the Golden City blackened
With each step you take in my Hall.
Marvel at perfection, for it is fleeting.
You have brought Sin to Heaven
And doom upon all the world.*

-- Canticle of Threnodies 8:13 (an excerpt from the Chant of Light)

The Chantry is a major religious organization based on worship of the Maker and observance of the writings of his prophet, Andraste. The group’s primary goal is to save all of the inhabitants of Thedas by sharing the Chant of Light with them, as they believe that the Maker will return as soon as all people – especially non-humans who worship differently – have heard the Chant. Most major villages across Thedas contain a Chantry, but the Grand Cathedral and the Divine, the leader of the entire organization, are located in Val Royeaux in the kingdom of Orlais. The Chantry possesses a great deal of political power due to its control of the Templars and its control over all legal lyrium trade. The Divine even has the ability to declare an Exalted March, which empowers agents of the Chantry to destroy all those who threaten worship of the Maker.

- **Elven Society**

1. **The Dalish**

We are the Dalish: keepers of the lost lore, walkers of the lonely path. We are the last of the Elvhenan, and never again shall we submit.

-- The Oath of the Dales

Dalish elves travel in nomadic clans and keep their distance from human cities for fear of persecution and enslavement. They train their mages outside of a Circle, can work with unique substances, and are proficient in magic related to nature. Much of their culture was lost due to their historical enslavement by the magisters of the Tevinter Imperium, and many Dalish believe that so much interaction with mortals caused the loss of elven immortality as well. However, the Dalish still practice the ways of their lost society in an attempt to reclaim it, such as worshiping the Old Gods, teaching every member of the clan their ancient tongue, and accepting a wise, magic-wielding Keeper as their leader.

2. **City Elves**

Nobody pays attention if an elf disappears here and there. Nobody cares what happens to us in the alienage.

-- Fiona, an elven Grey Warden and the Grand Enchanter of the Circle of Magi (*Dragon Age: Inquisition*)

Elves that dwell in human cities are segregated in cramped alienages and forced to endure deplorable living conditions, ranging from high crime rates to rampant disease and poverty. Each alienage contains both an elder and a Tree of the People to serve as a reminder of the loss of their prosperous ancient society. City elves often worship the Maker, fostering further distrust between themselves and the Dalish elves who still worship the Old Gods. Although city elves generally accept their situation, they will occasionally stage an uprising.

- **The City of Orzammar**

In Orzammar, things are solved quickly and with as much bloodshed as we can stand...and then a little bit more.

-- Nalthur, a leader of the Legion of the Dead

Orzammar is a dwarven kingdom located beneath the Frostback Mountains. It is one of the last dwarven kingdoms to withstand the darkspawn, as the creatures constantly attempt to burrow through the Deep Roads to the surface, regardless of the existence of a true Blight. The dwarves that dwell in this kingdom – or thaig – adhere to a strict and ruthless caste system by which thieves and undesirables are branded with facial tattoos and forced to live in squalor in Dust Town. Many of these tattooed, casteless dwarves work for a crime syndicate called the Carta in order to survive. Dwarven nobles, on the other hand, fight amongst themselves to vie for more power and influence, particularly with the Merchant's Guild. Some dwarves even participate in duels called Provings in order to settle disputes. Most dwarves do not leave for the surface, as they are cast out of dwarven society as soon as they do so. Dwarves are unable to dream and therefore cannot visit the Fade, so dwarves are unable to possess magical powers. The dwarves also work with the Chantry to supply it with lyrium, as dwarves can safely mine, touch, and work with lyrium due to their lack of connection to the Fade. Rather than worship the Maker, dwarves instead venerate Paragons, members of their society who accomplished great feats. One such paragon is Caridin, who created the Anvil of the Void, an instrument by which dwarves could create militaristic golems.

- **Select Traveling Companions**

The following is a series of brief descriptions of select traveling companions that the Warden may recruit during the game. If the Warden becomes close with a companion, that companion will perform better on the battlefield and possibly engage in a romantic relationship with the Warden. Additionally, if the Warden offends or fights with a companion too often, the companion may eventually leave the party. Only Morrigan, Leliana, Zevran, and Alistair (see **Grey Wardens**) are listed because the player may engage in a romantic relationship with them, and romance and sexuality are important topics in the following sections. Other companions are described as necessary.

1. **Morrigan** – One of the player's potential travel companions; she is the daughter of Flemeth, the powerful and seemingly ancient Witch of the Wilds, and she is a human mage who does significant entropy and elemental damage. She joins the Warden at her mother's behest, and she is suspicious of the source of her mother's immortality to the point of stealing Flemeth's grimoire to learn her secrets. She is unaccustomed to living in formal cities and interacting with anyone but her mother, so at times, she can seem blunt and

uncaring. However, should the Warden put in the effort to become her friend or a love interest, the Warden will find that Morrigan is a pragmatic advisor and a fiercely loyal friend. As a demiromantic heterosexual, Morrigan may only develop romantic feelings after forming a close emotional bond with a man. Therefore, only a determined male Warden may form a monogamous romantic relationship with her. Either a male Warden or Alistair may perform the Dark Ritual – a sexual encounter with Morrigan that will result in a demonic child – in order to prevent a Grey Warden from dying in the course of killing the Archdemon.

2. **Leliana** – One of the player’s potential travel companions; she is a talented human bard and rogue from Orlais. Prior to joining the Warden, Leliana was a Lay Sister of the Chantry, but she believes that the Maker came to her in a vision and directed her to fight alongside the Warden. She is skilled with a bow and sings songs to inspire the group in battle, providing useful buffs and tactical assistance from nature. Because she is a biromantic bisexual, Leliana may form a monogamous romantic relationship with either a male or a female Warden.
3. **Zevran** – One of the player’s potential travel companions; he is a crafty elven assassin who honed his skill with poison and subtlety while he was part of the Antivan Crows, a group of assassins based in Antiva to which he was sold as a young boy. He enjoys the finer things in life and is of the mind that life is short, so everyone should enjoy it and everything it has to offer. Zevran fully embraces his sexuality and openly admits to enjoying the act of sex, and he has a surprising sense of honor beneath his jests and innuendo. As a panromantic omnisexual, Zevran is both romantically and sexually attracted to people of any gender, so either a male or a female Warden may form a polyamorous (intimate but non-exclusive) relationship with him.

Breakdown

From its engagingly ominous introduction to its cathartic conclusion, the narrative of *DAO* provides an emotional and complex experience for the player that is successful in some ways and would benefit from improvement in others. First, the writers looked to Joseph Campbell’s monomyth – also referred to as the hero’s journey – which can be found in many popular and enduring stories throughout history, ranging from *The Odyssey* to *Star Wars*. In addition, the writers interwove the narrative with rewarding gameplay elements, such as unlocking combat specializations after interacting with travel companions so as to motivate the player to truly get to know the characters. Finally, in order to craft this generally successful narrative experience, the writers provided different types of character personalities, romantic experiences, and expressions of sexuality, ranging from the possibility of marriage to a heterosexual, wise-cracking, monogamous king to a polyamorous relationship with an open-minded omnisexual assassin. Inspiration from the monomyth, narrative unification with gameplay, and exploration of distinct personalities and different expressions of romance and sexuality all come together to craft a narrative experience that is engaging, long-lasting, and courageous.

In many ways, the story structure in *DAO* adheres to Joseph Campbell’s construction of the hero’s journey, as he outlined in his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Regardless of the player’s choice of origin story, every player begins the game in a relatively ordinary situation; the city elf, for instance, is preparing to marry an elf from another alienage, as is their custom, and the mage is preparing for her Harrowing, another expected and typical experience for a character of that class. However, in the course of completing their introductory quest, the player acquires new abilities and a sense of competence, and Duncan, the player’s Grey Warden mentor, arrives, heralding both the **Call to Adventure** and **Supernatural Aid**. Eventually Duncan conscripts the player, pushing them to **Cross the Threshold** into the adventure. In all six origin stories, the final crossing of the threshold is a dramatic and somewhat traumatic experience; in every case, the player is all but expelled from the only home they have ever known due to a mistake or crime that the player has made or committed. The fact that the player would have suffered unpleasant consequences if they had not left their society makes it easier for the player to willingly leave, happily avoiding those consequences. Although the player does not know

Duncan well, the player may still rely on Duncan for guidance and safekeeping, and so in order to push the player to flourish on their own, the writers wisely eliminated Duncan early in the game, at the Battle of Ostagar (**Belly of the Whale**).

The majority of *DAO* consists of the **Road of Trials**, a series of quests that the player must complete in order to prove that they are worthy not only of being a noble and righteous Grey Warden but also that they have earned the right to be called the Hero of Ferelden. Some choices are extraordinarily difficult, and achieving certain compromises requires more time, research, and effort, such as first restoring order to the Circle of Magi in order to save Connor, the possessed son of the Arl of Redcliffe; the faster way is to simply kill Connor and move on. The player's decisions and responses in conversation dictate both how the other characters perceive the player – sometimes determining whether or not a companion will leave the player – and how the player is able to proceed in the main storyline. Another example: if the player does not form alliances with nobles prior to the Landsmeet – a meeting to determine a new king – the player may not have enough votes to bring about their desired outcome. Finally, in slaying the Archdemon, the player achieves the **Ultimate Boon**; that is, the player ends the Fifth Blight, finally earning fame and the right to be called the Hero of Ferelden.

The general success of *DAO*'s narrative design is also due in great part to the narrative's connection to gameplay. Each origin story gradually introduces the player to both their character and their abilities, linking the two in a way that is realistic. An example of this is the choice to provide a Mabari warhound to the player as a traveling companion at the start of the human noble origin story. A human noble is wealthy and dogs are an important part of Ferelden human culture, so all other origin stories require all other class and race combinations to wait until later in the game to acquire the warhound. Also, after spending enough time having positive conversations with traveling companions, the player earns bonuses to those traveling companions' abilities, such as improved cunning, or unlocks combat specializations, such as Champion or Blood Mage. While these may motivate more players to participate in conversation, players still have the ability to skip through conversations and simply claim the rewards. Additionally, the player's race and origin story also determine how other characters in the world respond to the player. For instance, elves are oppressed, second-class citizens in the world of Thedas, and many characters whom an elven player encounters make no secret of their bigotry, unlocking unique dialogue options. Another example of a definitive narrative design choice is that only a female human noble who is a rogue or warrior may marry King Alistair, and only a male human noble who is a rogue or warrior may become king himself; mages, elves, and dwarves cannot sit on the throne. These restrictions are not made explicit during sex, race, and class selection at the start of the game, so it is intentionally an element that the player may only take into consideration in successive playthroughs. By selecting certain responses when conversing with characters in the game, the player can also establish their own personality, ranging from a snarky trickster, a flirt, a merciless bully, a benevolent leader, or any combination thereof. These conversation choices affect not only the player's relationships with their traveling companions and their would-be allies, but they also determine the outcome of the main storyline.

Finally, one of the most noteworthy aspects of *DAO*'s narrative is its exploration of romantic relationships and sexuality. In fact, the **Meeting with the Goddess** – the hero's experience of true love – is one of the key stages of Campbell's monomyth. The player may choose to engage in a romantic relationship with Zevran, Leliana, Alistair, and Morrigan (see **Select Traveling Companions**), although Alistair and Morrigan will only form a relationship with a Warden of the opposite gender. Because the writers developed each character to have their own unique approach to relationships and sexuality, every player has three distinct romantic options to explore during any given playthrough. Having grown up in a brothel, Zevran is completely comfortable with his sexuality and with sex itself, which is supported by his open-minded dialogue and his constant flirtation with the Warden. He is not interested in marriage, but the writers explicitly crafted him to be an example of a healthy, sex-positive person, normalizing both omnisexuality and the non-exclusive enjoyment of sex. Leliana has an air of innocence about her, and she seeks a relationship that will persist throughout the game and beyond. She is somewhat the stereotypical girl next door, but she has had experiences that suggest that she is more knowledgeable and complex than she would like to let on. Her general love and acceptance of everyone and her

appreciation of both male and female beauty hint naturally at her bisexuality; to her, it is the soul inside the person that counts. Morrigan is awkward when it comes to interacting with other people, but deep down, she does want romance. Because Morrigan is demiromantic, the player can only experience a relationship with Morrigan if they are patient enough to get to know her well and earn her trust. However, she is a Witch of the Wilds and cannot be tamed forever. Finally, Alistair is a happy-go-lucky twenty-something virgin with no sexual experience. His character is endearing, gentle, and honorable, having spawned a significant amount of fan art and fiction, which seems to have normalized losing one's virginity in one's twenties. After their first sexual encounter, Alistair forms a strong bond with a female Warden, and his loyalty, honor, and devotion are unwavering, even as the party encounters adversity. In fact, one of the greatest challenges in the game is determining the correct sequence of conversation choices that a player must select in order to achieve their desired outcome for Alistair, given his desire for monogamy and his claim to the Ferelden throne. Although these romantic experiences are very captivating for players who enjoy exploring interpersonal relationships, there still remains the issue of engaging players who are more interested in boosting their stats. The only real compromise that emerged in the game was the aforementioned reward of companion bonuses and unlocking specializations, but players still only receive those rewards after they deduce the most effective way to please that companion in conversation and story decisions.

In conclusion, the narrative design of *DAO* mostly succeeds in captivating and engaging the game's audience due to the writers' embrace of certain stages of Joseph Campbell's monomyth, subtle connections between narrative and more effective gameplay, and development of unique, likeable characters who enjoy different types of relationships and have different types of sexual and romantic orientations. The writers of the *Dragon Age* series have only built upon this strong foundation, increasing the number of meaningful conversation choices and expanding romantic relationships to the inclusion of exclusively homosexual characters in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, the most recent installment of the series. *Dragon Age: Inquisition* additionally features a friendly and capable NPC named Krem who is transgender and a lieutenant for one of the player's companions. While the writers still embrace the tried and true hero's journey story structure, they truly are pioneers in the exploration of different types of romantic relationships, gender identities, and expressions of sexuality in games.

Strongest Element

I'd be careful. First it's, I like you! Then ZAP! Frog time.
--Alistair (upon meeting Morrigan, a Witch of the Wilds)

The single best characterization in *DAO* is the development of Alistair, the illegitimate son of King Maric and the only remaining heir to the throne. While he could easily express excessive pride and arrogance about his claim, he wants nothing more than to live a peaceful, happy life, and his quirky sense of humor and his ability to see the positive in almost everything is endearing. He also possesses an innocence and a willingness to follow that makes the Warden feel both supported and competent; if this Grey Warden who has trained as a Templar wants to follow the player, then surely the player must be someone worth following. In the context of a romance and sex, Alistair is inexperienced but a hopeless romantic and eager to learn, a genuine example of a more realistic, innocent prince charming.

Unsuccessful Element

The plot line connected to entering the Fade to save Connor results in a somewhat dry, sparse experience in a quest called "Lost in Dreams." Many of the areas in the Fade itself look the same, and there are very few visual or story-related cues in place to inform the player where to go or what to do to proceed in the levels. While this area is undoubtedly intended to be a series of intricate puzzles in a confusing realm, it may have been more interesting if it had included hidden side quests that told a story about some unique and useful character that the player could only learn about in the Fade.

Highlight

The absolute best moment in the game narrative was when the player traveled to Haven and entered the ruined temple that contained the Urn of Sacred Ashes. Up until that point in the game, the player had only read assorted codex entries about Andraste and the Maker, but it was an invigorating, epic experience to interact with the spirits of the people who knew, loved, and hated Andraste and to look upon the ashes themselves. Near the end of the Urn of Sacred Ashes quest, the player must have enough faith to walk through fire. The player emerges unscathed on the other side, having been cleansed of any sins, perhaps including those committed in the player's origin story. It is as if the player really can begin anew and set out to earn the right to be called the Hero of Ferelden.

Critical Reception

Jeff Haynes' review of *DAO* in IGN² discussed the importance of the decisions that the player makes in the game, noting that "Dragon Age frequently presents you with options that can radically change events -- opening up separate side quests while closing others off" (Haynes 2009, p.2). Haynes argues that the romantic segments feel awkward and disingenuous, particularly due to the purposeful censorship of nudity in the romantic cut scenes. Despite this, he does acknowledge that, because of all of the different conversation options and the different origin stories, a player can explore multiple playthroughs without having the same experience twice. His overall rating of the game is an 8.7 out of 10, grading especially high on presentation but lower on graphics quality. Additionally, *DAO* received a Metascore of 91 out of 100 according to the reviews of 67 critics on Metacritic³. The review notes that *DAO* is "one of the most successful role-playing games in the industry," remarking upon its emotionally-driven narrative and "a dark and mature story and gameplay." Although the game does censor sex, it still introduces the player to adult themes, choices, and experiences.

Lessons

- **Craft characters that are distinct both in how they interact with others and in how they express themselves and their sexuality.** This helps expand the target audience so that more players will feel interested in and comfortable with participating in the RPG experience. By extension, this also enhances the richness, depth, and diversity of the world in which the game is set.
- **Tailor class specializations to different player types – with balanced pros and cons – that are genuinely useful to the player.** Some class specializations, such as the Arcane Warrior, Bard, and Duelist, have very limited battle tactics and are not especially effective. The player should ideally have a difficult time deciding which specialization to choose, thus building tension, investment, and engagement.
- **Design side quests that further the story, thus maintaining the player's interest in the main quest line.** Meaningful quests promote engagement and dispel the player's desire to break from the world and flow of the game.

Summation

Dragon Age: Origins is a beloved and emotionally powerful game, due in no small part to a well-crafted narrative design that adheres closely to Joseph Campbell's hero's journey. Also, given the game's six unique origin stories and extensive conversation trees, each playthrough is virtually like playing a brand new game.

² Haynes, Jeff. *Dragon Age: Origins Review*. <http://www.ign.com/articles/2009/11/04/dragon-age-origins-review?page=1>. IGN. 2009.

³ Dragon Age: Origins. <http://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/dragon-age-origins>. Metacritic. 2009.

The time and energy required to fully engage with one's traveling companions and earn their trust mirrors the time one spends getting to know new friends in real life. The game allows people to explore personal relationships and learn how to interact with different types of people in a safe, stress-free environment. If one accidentally says something to offend, one can simply reload an old save and try something new. A player may also choose to take a stand on issues of racism, classism, and sexism, choices that can affect both the story and the participation of the player's companions.

We as a society can look to *DAO*'s multidimensional narrative, dialogue, and character development to help improve people's interpersonal skills and promote understanding of different personalities, sexualities, and life preferences in the real world.