

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Darkest Dungeon
Platform: PC
Genre: Turn-Based RPG
Release Date: January 2016
Developer: Red Hook Studios
Publisher: Red Hook Studios
Creative Director/Lead Designer: Chris Bourassa/Tyler Sigman

Overview

Darkest Dungeon is a gothic roguelike role-playing game where you play as a descendent of a noble family, determined to cleanse your inherited estate of the evil that infests it. A letter from a deceased relative informs you that, as a result of his luxurious lifestyle and various decadent indulgences, he learned of an ancient gateway buried beneath the family estate that held some “fabulous, unnamable power.” He spent the remainder of the family’s fortune on mercenaries and occult rituals in a frantic effort to unearth the artifact, and upon finally reaching it, discovered that the “power” it contained was, in fact, a portal to some terrifying, eldritch other dimension, in which dwelled all manner of hellish monsters. Driven mad by his findings, he fled; and before committing suicide, he composed a letter to you, begging you to right his wrongs, and “deliver our family... from the ravenous, clutching shadows... of the Darkest Dungeon.”

Cleansing your newly-gifted estate is a far greater challenge than it seems, however; you must hire and send mercenaries to purge the evil from the various tainted dungeons on your land, and use the various relics and materials they unearth to restore the surrounding town area to working order. As you send the mercenaries again and again into the shadowy depths, the macabre nature of their work takes its toll on them, and they accrue stress regularly; so you also have to give them time to relax, to drink and pray their cares away, until they are ready to face the darkness again. With experience, they can build up a resistance to their grim foe, and equipped with newly-forged armor and refined skills from the rebuilt blacksmith and fighter’s guild in town, they may finally be able to assault the Darkest Dungeon and close the portal once and for all – but be warned, pain and anguish lurks at every corner, and the longer and more experienced a mercenary becomes, the more tragic and devastating their death is.

Characters

- **Narrator/Ancessor** – The author of the letter calling for your aid, your previous ancestor is the man responsible for the current corrupted and ruined state of your domain. He lived in the manor when it was uncorrupted, and his self-indulgent way of life led him to destroy the family's funds and good name in his pursuit of power. Now he lies dead at his own hand, leaving you to pick up after him. As you campaign to undo what he has done, he narrates, constantly giving his posthumous perspective on his actions and yours. Having willingly corrupted himself and gone completely mad, no one knows the true nature of what you have to face better than him.
- **Mercenaries** – In your efforts to restore your polluted country home, you must hire mercenaries to do the fighting for you. Every mercenary has their own reasons for coming to your aid; some are driven to fight back the evil, others are purely interested in the riches you offer, and there are even some occult who, having heard of the horrors that lie within your domain, wish to see and experience it with their own eyes. Here is a list of the various characters that may come to your aid:
 - **Abomination** – A man cursed with lycanthropy, the Abomination has been hunted, pursued, and branded for the cursed power he holds within. While useful in his human form, he can turn into his werewolf form at will, bestowing him greater power in combat, but at the cost of unsettling his teammates with his ghastly visage. He seeks refuge in your lands, knowing that the eldritch nature of his affliction gives him an edge against this arcane foe.
 - **Arbalest** – A backline soldier with backbone, the Arbalest has battle experience aplenty, and is naturally accustomed to fighting in a party. With her massive crossbow and various battlefield utilities, she's one of the more well-equipped party members for the long fight ahead. She fights for you, preparing herself – and the party – for war.
 - **Bounty Hunter** – The versatile combat Renaissance man, the Bounty Hunter can execute targets on his own and can fight from every party position. He's best equipped for fighting single targets, but has the utility and versatility to combat nearly any foe, and can use his experience to prepare himself and his allies for combat. Killing is his profession, and he fights for you knowing full well that he'll have his work cut out for him.
 - **Crusader** – The traditional stalwart knight, the Crusader is a zealous, sturdy fighter, leading from the front by word and deed. He uses his faith to assist him in combat and assuage his party (and himself) of stress while camping. He fights to cleanse the world of corruption, using his holy might to drive the back the darkness.

- **Grave Robber** – The grungy guerilla fighter, the Grave Robber is extremely nimble and extremely dangerous in combat, using her naturally slippery behavior to constantly relocate herself to the most advantageous fighting position. Her grimy occupation makes her familiar with the squalid dungeons, and she assists the party by scouting for danger, disabling traps, and calming her allies downplaying the severity of their surroundings. She fights for her life – and in that, she is in her element.
- **Hellion** – Barbaric and bold, the Hellion is one of the few mercenaries you can encounter that *wants* to fight. She lives for the rush of battle, capable of doing serious damage with a myriad of abilities, all utilizing her massive, razor-sharp halberd; however, her taxing battle technique tires her out quickly, making her vulnerable if not used carefully. Her graceless behavior may alienate her from the party, but her fearlessness unites them all against a common foe. She may fight for your coin, but she truly fights for herself.
- **Highwayman** – A resourcefully dangerous rogue, the Highwayman comes equipped with dagger and flintlock pistol, his kit enabling him to deal damage effectively at any range. He is the most flexible and most straightforward of all the party members; thieves are accustomed to the grim darkness, so to him, this is par for the course. He fights for you, putting his time-earned skills to use.
- **Hound Master** – The Hound Master is as his moniker describes; an ex-lawman who works closely in tandem with his faithful wolfhound to harm and harry his foes with blackjack and bite. He's capable of bleeding and weakening his foes to make his party more effective, thanks to his nimble canine friend. Friendlier than he looks, he's also capable of guarding his allies, and can use his hound to scout ahead, or rely on man's best friend to calm their worries. He fights to protect the innocent, and stop the spread of this malignant evil.
- **Jester** – Armed with weapons as twisted as his sense of humor, the Jester is another unconventional ally; he dances to and fro in combat, jumping into the front lines to deliver death-defying assaults on the enemy, and then fading into the back row to provide energizing ballads that buff the entire party. Off the battlefield, he keeps the crew's spirits up with his performance talents and playful nature. He fights for a worthy cause, and to give his greatest performance ever.
- **Leper** – A hardened warrior and a tragic soul, the Leper is the most durable of all the mercenaries. Accustomed to a life of difficulty and pain, he holds the vanguard in combat, weathering blow after blow and

returning the favor with swings of his massive executioner's sword. Out of battle, he is incredibly self-sufficient, taking time to calm his nerves and prepare himself for future fights. He fights the battle he's been fighting all his life; the battle to stay alive.

- **Man-at-Arms** – A man for whom mercenary is the perfect descriptor, the Man-at-Arms is a stoic veteran soldier, who leads and fights from the front with effortless ease borne of countless campaigns. Capable of protecting weaker allies and instructing stronger ones, he remains focused at all times, always ready to attack the enemy. He fights; not for you, or for his life, but because it is all he knows.
- **Occultist** – A man of great knowledge and of greater curiosity, the Occultist is all too familiar with the arcane forces that blight your property. He fights with ritual dagger and rite, summoning mystic forces to attack his foes and mend his allies. Due to the unpredictable nature of his power, his skills regularly vary in strength, and while effective, they can occasionally backfire and harm his party. His dark powers may unnerve the party, but as with your ancestor, none are more equipped to battle this eldritch foe than he. He fights to satisfy his lust for lore; a lust that he knows may very well damn him to madness.
- **Plague Doctor** – A scientist with a knack for alchemy, the Plague Doctor uses her experimental weaponry to plague her foes with noxious gases and poisonous grenades. Utility is her specialty; she's capable of curing her allies of diseases and dire wounds, as well as blinding and stunning her foes. Alone, she is endangered, but in a party, she has an answer for almost every situation. Her motive for fighting is a mystery, but she fights all the same.
- **Vestal** – A zealous and devoted warrior, the Vestal is a versatile support character whose faith grants her the power to heal her allies and smite her foes. In combat, she fights from the back like with divine judgement; at camp, she leads the party in prayer and song to soothe their troubled soul. Much like the Crusader, she fights to rid the world of unholy corruption.

Breakdown

In the beginning of the game, after the intro cinematic that shows your ancestor's (and the estate's) fall to darkness, you fight your way to the town around the mansion. Upon reaching the town, you discover that it is in a serious state of disrepair, due to your forbear's foolish behavior. You immediately set out to explore the surrounding dungeons, with the goal of finding family treasure and relics to sell, to return the town to working order. To do this, you must hire mercenaries; they appear in the town regularly, having heard rumors of the riches and adventure that the mansion holds within. Using this mercenaries to probe the surrounding areas, you're set into a routine of sending

them out, using the goods they find to upgrade the town, and giving them money to relax with before they set out on another quest. This last step is the most important; the malevolent nature of the forces the mercenaries encounter unsettles them, and can potentially drive them insane, endangering (and further stressing) their fellow party members. So as you use these warriors for the greater goal of returning the surrounding area to its former grandeur, you must keep watch over their stability; some can grow used to the trauma, and take on greater and greater threats for proportionally greater wealth, but many will fall in battle, and many more will be driven mad by the things they have seen. Eventually, when the town is fully repaired, and your soldiers are well-equipped and battle-hardened, you can send them to the very dungeon where the portal resides – the Darkest Dungeon – in the hopes of closing it and sealing the evil on your land away for good.

The story is composed well, but the game is so much more than that. Darkest Dungeon's high concept, stated by the Creative Director, is thus:

“Darkest Dungeon is an uncompromising gothic roguelike turn-based RPG about the psychological stresses of adventure. A low fantasy Lovecraftian adventure that forces players to make the best of a bad situation, face difficult tradeoffs, and live with permanent consequences.”¹

Darkest Dungeon, using the setting of a “low fantasy Lovecraftian adventure”, seeks to provide the player an experience that shows them the realistic stresses inherent in a traditional adventure. The story reflects this well, providing a flavorful and rich lore background for everything in the game, including having all the character classes fit the atmosphere and flavor of the game, and utilizing the narration to provide additional contextual narrative background is a good touch, but the world stretches beyond the narrative; the clarity of direction that the high concept presents allows every other aspect of the game reflect the world as well.

The art direction and general mood reinforces the dark and gritty subject matter, using the story's chosen environments (ruins, cove, bog, etc.) to provide an immersive visual style, resplendent with the gothic beauty and creepy atmosphere that continues to reinforce the darkness of the narrative. Each dungeon area in the game may have its own theme, and applies that to the monsters, environments and background images within, but it's all in the greater pursuit of uniting under the narrative. The "Ruins" area of the game is populated with animated skeletons, evil cultists, and necromancers, and the background images focus greatly on gothic architecture in a state of disrepair. The interactive elements that you may find within the dungeon are typically dusty tomes, rotting bookshelves, and broken altars. The same is true of the Cove, Warrens, and Weald area; populated with pelagic horrors, mutated beast-men, and diseased wildlife respectively.

As it was with the art and narrative, so it is with the mechanics and gameplay. The aforementioned story arc is, from a mechanical standpoint, the natural progression

¹ Chris Bourassa – What is Creative Direction: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Prll-svygk>

of the game. You *need* to level up your mercenaries and upgrade the town to close the Darkest Dungeon, and your mercenaries *will* be stressed out and potentially go mad. The stress system that makes the combat and strategy more difficult was created with the narrative in mind, and it reinforces the gruesome and harsh environment that your heroes are fighting in. Most important of all, the game is constantly automatically saved; any and all choices you make are *permanent*, so the decisions you are forced to make have *real* repercussions, and gives them the gravity that the same decisions would have in real life.

All of the elements that make up traditional video games; art, sound, narrative, game design, etc., are what makes any game a game. In Darkest Dungeon, these do more than simply stand on their own; they reinforce each other, constantly referencing and building off of their strongest elements. The ancestor described in the story constantly narrates over the actions in battle, so when a nightmarish ghoul screeches as it sights your party, he describes the horrifying chill down his spine; a chill that your party members are currently experiencing, thanks to the stress mechanics. When your party encounters an eerily glowing red orb that, upon being touched, summons a hideously indescribable stygian monstrosity that takes them to another dimension, the ghastly visage and environment that confronts your party is just as potent as the one visually presented to you. Darkest Dungeon's quality comes from the sum of its parts, and their end goal of presenting the player with a terrifying, realistic, unforgiving world. The stress that you go through in playing the game is the same stress that your characters are experiencing; and it may be easy, as it was for your ancestor, to give up and let the evil win. However, the best choice, in both the game and in life, is to continue persevering against the odds, to come out on top and put an end to your righteous task, and to have grown considerably for doing so, despite the sights you may have seen.

Strongest Element

Darkest Dungeon's strongest element is undoubtedly the mercenary classes that the player can encounter in the game. All of them are chosen and described in the narrative style of the game; they all fit the setting thematically. Their backgrounds explain their motivation for coming to fight the evil, and even further explain their fighting style, the role they fill within the party, and the ways that they deal with stress. Those three things are also perfectly represented in their combat abilities (the Man-at-Arms being able to protect people, and the Abomination transforming into a werewolf and stressing out the party), camping abilities (the Jester playing songs to relax the group, and the Hellion entering a battle trance), and the de-stressing methods that they have affinity for (Crusaders and Vestals like to pray, Highwaymen and Bounty Hunters like to gamble, etc.).

All of these elements combine to give the characters a sense of authenticity, so they all have well-rounded, deep personalities. The reason why this is so important is because of the focal point they play within the game; they are the ones you're sending out to fight, they're getting the money to upgrade the town, and their intact sanity is the only thing keeping your hope of cleansing the estate alive. All of this makes the decisions within the game significant; whether or not you send out your one favorite

character to fight a boss is a difficult choice to make when you know that you might be *sending them out to die*.

Unsuccessful Element

One of the things in Darkest Dungeon that has changed frequently over time has been the mechanical balance within the game, with respect to narrative. The game's combat has to be difficult, and the player has to make difficult decisions that sometimes result in things going really badly and the entire party dying. Forcing players to repeatedly experience those kinds of situations is difficult, as it will make the game frustrating, and make people put it down. Still, those decisions have to have that weight, so the game has to be difficult. If you could turn every situation into a winning one, then the consequences of your decisions no longer matter, because they never *seriously matter*. Unfortunately, this means Darkest Dungeon is uncompromisingly difficult, which makes it a difficult game to recommend for *everyone*; someone who wants to take part in an immerse gameplay experience may not also be a master of tactical RPG systems, and because of that, the "real" game is basically off-limits to them.

Highlight

The moment where Darkest Dungeon really comes together is in the Death's Door concept and boss fights, and how they both make combat incredibly tense and dramatic. When a character drops below 0 health, they are on Death's Door, and any damage to them from that point on has a chance to kill them immediately. It's the only way a character can die, but the game does a terrific job of making it seem poignant every time it occurs. The music changes, the character utters a character-specific version of the "I don't want to die like this!" line, everyone in the party stresses out, and the narrator remarks on the frailty of human life. If they are healed off of 0hp, they de-stress, remark on how "they're not done yet!", and the party carries on. However, if they die, the team is briefly shocked, and the narrator makes another appropriate comment, but the battle carries on. The game doesn't *force* you to grieve over your lost character at all, the grief comes from your own weight in the character that died. If they were simply a new low-level character, their death is regrettable, but not unexpected. The death of a high-level character, that is a representation of all the time, effort, and money you've sunk into the pursuit of ending the game, is a far more difficult thing to come to terms with.

In addition to this, nearly all the bosses in the game force you to constantly court death in one way or another, and they're all designed so that if you stop fighting the boss to try and save a character it will doom ALL of your characters to death. These two things combine beautifully to make boss fights incredibly difficult missions to willingly undertake. Your first character death in Darkest Dungeon is notable, and your first boss fight might not be too difficult, but the first time your whole party dies at a boss's feet as *a direct result of the bad decisions you made* is the moment where you really just have to stop and grieve.

Critical Reception

Official reviews of Darkest Dungeon are hard to come by, as the game is not officially released, and is still in beta. Of the few reviews out there, people praise the game for the writing and art, as well as the narrator's voice acting, all reinforcing the grim content of the game. The comments about the game's difficulty mostly border on somewhere between good and bad. People are upset with the game being difficult and unrelenting, but relent by admitting that this is the message the game tries to deliver from the outset, and agree that the difficulty makes character death a more frightening prospect². Very rarely does any review call it a bad game, but a great deal of them remark that the experience offered by it "is not for everyone"³. This can be mostly considered an unsuccessful element, but since it's the only thing that gives the game the true gravity that a Lovecraftian adventure game deserves, it is, in one way, Darkest Dungeon's greatest strength.

Lessons

- **Character classes with diverse and deep background can be used to diversify gameplay AND story:** Character classes in RPGs are typically very traditional warrior/rogue/mage archetypes; Darkest Dungeon showcases how customizing them to fit the setting of your game makes them stand out in gameplay and in style.
- **Having a target vision for a game from its onset makes it easier to justify adding/removing content:** The clear vision that DD has allows team members of all disciplines an easy way to propose additional content and mechanics in the game. Not only does it make "what if we had this" arguments easier⁴, it also makes sure that everything in the game feels like it fits well together.
- **Using macro story goals to support macro design choices makes both things stronger:** The overarching story elements of character stress and madness directly inspired the main mechanics of the stress system and character quirks; creating situations where a hero may go mad in story, and contract the Madness quirk in game.

Summation

Darkest Dungeon's goal of providing a gritty realistic version of D&D served as the perfect unifying concept to tie the game together. Starting with a well-defined vision from the game's outset made the game feel decisively more whole, and as a result of that, makes all of the individual pieces stronger. In addition to this, DD shows how an incredibly grotesque and bleak game can still provide a setting

² <http://www.pcgamer.com/darkest-dungeon-impressions-a-maddening-game-to-love/>

³ <http://www.thejimquisition.com/2015/08/darkest-dungeon-and-the-perils-of-early-access/>

⁴ "The struggle, success, and psychological stress of Darkest Dungeon", <http://ookpixels.ca/eye-of-the-beholder/>

that asks difficult questions and has a truly meaningful story. Above all these things, however, DD shows how games can provide a platform that can give players an authentic, meaningful experiences. Good storytelling is good and all, but books and movies are at their greatest when they teach us something and give us insight into our lives, and Darkest Dungeon shows that games can do that, too.