

# Game Narrative Review

---

**Game Title:** Amnesia: The Dark Descent

**Platform:** PC

**Genre:** Survival Horror

**Release Date:** September 8, 2010

**Developer:** Frictional Games

**Publisher:** Frictional Games

**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** Mikael Hedberg

**Author of this review:** Joshua Kasten

**School:** The Guildhall at SMU

## Overview

---

*Amnesia: The Dark Descent* is a survival horror game recently released by Frictional Games, a small independent European developer whose previous works have all been survival horror titles in the same gameplay vein as *Amnesia*. *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* follows the story of the amnesiac Daniel as he explores Castle Brennenburg in the year 1839, in a desperate attempt to avoid the cosmic force that is trying to destroy him, slay the master of the castle, and discover who he is. The writers took primary inspiration from H.P. Lovecraft—particularly his short story, *The Outsider*. Horror, confusion, and insanity are key themes in both the plotline and the gameplay mechanics. While an amnesiac protagonist is an overused technique in video game stories, *Amnesia* overcomes some of the flaws and expected failings of the narrative device, thus making it worthy of investigation.

## Characters

---

- **Daniel** – Daniel is a British man, roughly in his mid-30s. At the beginning of the game he has willingly thrown away all of his memories for an unknown purpose, and spends most of the game piecing together what he can from the torn pages of his journal. Before the game begins, Daniel was an archeologist who inadvertently encountered an object of incredible power while on an expedition. In doing so, he caused a powerful entity known as “The Shadow” to begin to stalk him, killing everyone Daniel knew in its attempt to reclaim that artifact. Journal entries throughout the game detail Daniel’s increasingly desperate attempts to escape The Shadow—a quest which ultimately brings him to Castle Brennenburg.
- **Cornelius Agrippa** – Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, based off and named after the real life theologian and occultist, appears near the end of the game as a friendly spirit trapped in a horrible and mutilated husk of a human body. Once, he did occult research alongside Alexander. After they began to disagree about the

nature of Alexander's experiments, Alexander trapped his spirit in the husk, in order to keep him alive and make use of his vast occult knowledge. In the game, Agrippa offers to help Daniel in exchange for Daniel's help in freeing his spirit.

- **Alexander of Brennenburg** – Alexander of Brennenburg is the primary antagonist of the game, and is its most mysterious character. Daniel believes that he took advantage of Daniel's situation in order to serve his own needs. Some of his writings indicate that he may be a being from another world, desperate to return home. Other writings imply that he may be trying to revive a lost wife or lover. All that the game reveals for sure is that he has committed atrocious acts of torture in order to accomplish his research, and that he has been the master of Castle Brennenburg for many, many centuries.

## **Breakdown**

---

The game opens with Daniel drinking an elixir. He questions his choice as he stumbles around the hallways of the castle, struggling to retain his memory, before finally collapsing. Daniel awakens with no memory of who he is, where he is, or how he got there. The player follows the trail Daniel left behind as he stumbled around; until he arrives at a letter he had written to himself. The letter provides the player with three pieces of information—his name is Daniel, he willingly chose to forget everything, and that he must find and kill Alexander of Brennenburg.

From that point on, the game tells its story through diary entries, and delivers the impact primarily through voice acting. This is a result of the limited resources available to the small development team. They used very few resources in order to tell a story, which was effectively done for the atmosphere of the game. However, this also removes the player from the primary action of the story. While the voice acting keeps the player from feeling as if he is reading a novel, it is still not as immersive as it could be.

One part of the story breaks this mold, however. Near the end of the game, the player encounters Agrippa—a cheery sounding spirit, unnervingly occupying a mutilated husk. Lingering around Agrippa will cause him to talk with you, either to give you a task to do or illuminate aspects of the story from his point of view. His talkative and pleasant nature makes him a comforting presence in a threatening environment, and encourages the player to linger around him and hear his dialogue. Much like most of the story in *Amnesia*, the design spends little effort creating the sequence, but they obtained the maximum with what they could accomplish.

As a whole, the storyline displays Daniel as a man who, faced with his own death, commits cruel acts of torture, while being goaded on by Alexander. His own personal disgust with what he has become, coupled with his own fear of death, has driven him to the brink of madness, and the player sees this in both the increasingly unstable journal entries and Daniel's own reactions and resurgent memories.

## Strongest Element

---

The best storytelling aspect of the game is, by far, the moments where atmosphere foreshadows the story elements that would eventually become explicit. For instance, an early level shows Alexander has a room full of mutilated animal corpses, and research notes on Alexander's animal experimentation. This unsettling scene foreshadows the later revelation regarding his human experimentation. Another moment shows the player the specific ways Daniel tortured inmates by leading the player to the Iron Maiden and other implements he used. While the player investigates the scene in front of him, a narration plays where Alexander instructs Daniel on its use. Behind the dialogue, the player can hear screams of the tortured in the background.

## Unsuccessful Element

---

The weakest element of the storyline is the ending. While there are three endings, none of them adds anything to the experience in particular. The game plays with the question of whether or not it is a good idea to kill Alexander, and reveals near the end that your motivations were less noble than they initially seemed, and while Agrippa offers the player a third option for a different ending, certain notes imply that Agrippa may have been lying as well. These plotlines ultimately lead nowhere, as letting Alexander live leads to the worst ending, helping Agrippa leads to the "best" ending, and simply killing Alexander leads to the only ending with any kind of finality. The ending toyed with underdeveloped story elements, and offered a choice to the player at the very end. Because the game had been linear until that point, the sequence felt underdeveloped as a whole.

## Highlight

---

Near the end of the game, the player finds a note expecting to find written monologue, only to find an interactive flashback sequence. A grown man is lying on the table, bound and restrained. The player must then paint runes on the man's skin and ritually sacrifice him with a nearby dagger while Daniel chants "Paint the man, cut the lines," the mantra Alexander taught him in order to steady his hand for the sacrifice. The game thrusts the player into the story in an unusually direct way, and it has more effect than any other story scene in the game. As a final nod, the player will see a powerful hallucination of the painted man hanging from the ceiling of the next room, showing how much that memory affected Daniel.

## Critical Reception

---

*Amnesia: The Dark Descent* received generally high reviews. For a small, independent game, a relatively large number of sites reviewed it. It currently has a score of 85 on Metacritic. Its atmosphere in particular received the bulk of the acclaim, with virtually every review of it citing it as the scariest game in recent gaming history. The story has also received acclaim, with different reviews calling out the sequence involving the medieval torture equipment as a highlight.

Game informer in particular praised *Amnesia*'s storyline. "Amnesia's setting is too intricate, and the pacing of reveals is too well crafted to disrespect. The backstory parallels Daniel's current quest. Amnesia follows the tradition of Lovecraft, Poe, and Shelley, weaving a tale deeply tied to the 19th century's spirit of discovery, power, and glory."

## Lessons

---

1. Any game can have a good story with minimal use of assets if used properly. With proper context, a series of written notes can replace NPCs. A handful of well-placed props and a narration can be just as effective as a fully fleshed out cutscene.
2. Good storylines fully integrate with the mechanics and atmosphere of the game. The best sections of *Amnesia* were when the storyline had thematic or literal resonance with the imagery the player was seeing in the level. Some of the worst sections completely removed the storyline from the gameplay—during certain puzzles, for instance.
3. Despite the common negative conception, games can still use *Amnesia* as a narrative device with surprising strength, so long as the game integrates the player's sense of discovery with the character's sense of self-discovery.
4. Storyline is one of the most important aspects of immersion in a game world—it is what allows the player to understand the context behind the atmosphere, without which immersion is impossible. Games can best create emotional responses, such as fear, when it has immersed the player in the world of the game—and the world only exists when there is a story behind it..

## Summation

---

- *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* is a unique game in that it is true survival horror—no combat. Thus, the game is only fun when the player believes in the game. Reviews commonly talk about how frightening the game was, and that can only work if, on some level, they are not aware that they are safe in their own home playing a video game. In other words, *Amnesia* must have a believable atmosphere in order to succeed, and the game accomplishes this in part due to environmental storytelling. *Amnesia*'s storytelling is not perfect, and it shows its limitations, but it uses what it has to accomplish an effect far greater than what many other games of its size have done.