

# Game Narrative Review

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**Game Title:** Destiny 2 (Base Campaign Only)  
**Platform:** Xbox One, PS4, Microsoft Windows  
**Genre:** First-person Shooter  
**Release Date:** September 6, 2017 (Xbox One); September 6, 2017 (Playstation 4);  
October 24, 2017 (Microsoft Windows)  
**Developer:** Bungie  
**Publisher:** Activision  
**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** Jason Harris (Lead Writer),  
Christine Thompson (Lead Writer), Luke Smith (Creative Director)

## Overview

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Centuries in the future, a benevolent machine god known as the Traveler appears and begins terraforming planets in the solar system. After humanity establishes contact, the Traveler aids them in reaching a technological golden age that lasts for centuries. Unfortunately, a primordial opposing force to the Traveler known as the Darkness, and its horde of minions, arrive in the solar system and nearly drive humanity to extinction. In a climactic battle, the Traveler sacrifices itself to clear out the Darkness and uses what power it has left to create the Ghosts: small drones capable of resurrecting long-dead warriors and granting them effective super-powers. You play as one of these resurrected “guardians”, tasked with defending what is left of humanity as they hide in the stronghold known as the last city.

Three years after your resurrection, you return to the last city only to discover that the Red Legion, an elite subdivision of the hostile alien race known as the Cabal, have launched a surprise attack on the city and the Traveler itself. Despite your best efforts, the Red Legion and their leader, Dominus Ghaul, capture the city and cage the Traveler, stripping you of your powers and immortality.

The rest of the game is spent recovering from this defeat, reclaiming your powers from a long-lost shard of the Traveler, rallying the scattered forces of humanity, and taking back the city and the Traveler.

## Characters

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- **Your Guardian / Ghost:** Unlike the previous game, where the player avatar and their Ghost were largely separate characters, in Destiny 2 the two of them are treated as one singular conscience. Supporting characters will often speak to the player, only for their Ghost to respond from the player avatar's viewpoint.
- **Commander Zavala:** Zavala is the leader of the Vanguard, the council of three guardians that acts as the military governing body of the city. The Vanguard has one representative for each class, with Zavala functioning as the Titan Vanguard. He is dutiful and highly protective of the city. He oversees the game's strike operations, mid-game linear combat encounters that finish with a difficult enemy.
- **Cayde-6:** A fan-favorite character, Cayde-6 is a charmingly witty and rather rash rogue who functions as the Hunter Vanguard. He manages the game's patrol zones - semi-open-world areas in which the bulk of the game's content takes place. He also sells treasure maps leading to valuables scattered around in the patrol zones.
- **Ikora Rey:** The stoic and deeply religious Warlock Vanguard, Ikora Rey allows players to meditate (i.e. "replay") the game's story missions post-completion.
- **Lord Shaxx:** A haughty man with the strength of a mountain and a killer sense of humor, Lord Shaxx oversees the Crucible, the Player-versus-Player arena activity available in Destiny 2.
- **Amanda Holliday:** The Vanguard's shipwright and their go-to for technical problems. Her most notable features are her southern accent and almost creepy level of fascination with mechanics.
- **Suraya Hawthorne:** A rebellious sniper who lives outside of the walls of the last city. She doesn't trust authority much, but clearly has a well-established sense of philanthropy. She has a pet bird named Louis, wears a poncho, and can be annoyingly snobby at times.
- **Devrin Kay:** This man is the walking stereotype of a 50-something British gentlemen. He is a sniper that oversees the game's first patrol zone, the European Dead Zone, and acts as the turn-in point for rewards gained while exploring it.
- **Deputy Commander Sloane:** The dutiful soldier equivalent of Devrim Kay, but this time overseeing the second patrol area, Saturn's moon Titan.
- **Failsafe:** Failsafe is a glitchy artificial intelligence tasked with protecting the crew of a colonial ship after it crashed into the centaur Nessus. Unfortunately, the crash occurred nearly 700 years ago, and thus her entire crew has passed from either starvation or old age. She has two personalities, her default chipper tone,

and a glitched sarcastic tone that chimes in every so often. She functions as the rewards vendor for the third patrol zone, Nessus.

- **Asher Mir:** An awkward know-it-all that oversees the game's fourth and final patrol zone, Jupiter's moon Io.
- **The Speaker:** This religious figurehead spends the entire game as Ghaul's prisoner, and functions mainly as an exposition terminal for explaining the themes of Destiny to Ghaul (and the audience).
- **Dominus Ghaul:** The massive Cabal warlord who invades the city and takes your powers away. He was born a runt, and worked his way up the ranks of a corrupted empire, only to perform a successful coup and take control for himself. Because of his low beginnings, he feels entitled to become a guardian, and cannot understand why the Traveler would throw its lot in with such a weak race as humanity when the clearly superior Cabal option is readily available.
- **The Consul:** Ghaul's mentor and father figure, the Consul attempts and fails to check Ghaul's delusions of earning the Traveler's gift, and ends the game strangled as a result. He is also the only member of the entire Red Legion that seems to have any drop of sense in him, and is somehow more of a threat than the game's main villain.
- **The Red Legion (Cabal):** Ghaul's massive legion make up all but a few of the Cabal enemies encountered in Destiny 2. The Cabal are marked by their use of close-range weaponry and large health pools.
- **The Fallen:** The Fallen are a species of aliens formerly blessed by the Traveler, but abandoned when the Hive and the Darkness came to their homeworld. Now, they follow the Traveler relentlessly in the hopes of reclaiming its favor, but, in need of bare necessities, have taken to scavenging and stealing from humanity. Most Fallen have fast movement speeds and disorienting measures that enable them to outmaneuver their opponents rather than face them head-on.
- **The Hive:** These are the major agents of the Darkness. The Hive receive power from symbiote worms that feed on destruction. The Hive specialize in horde combat, with their general fighting style being a simple matter of death by a thousand cuts.
- **The Vex:** A semi-robotic collective composed of sentient microorganisms, the Vex possess intelligences powerful enough to manipulate both space and time. They can convert material at the molecular level to adjust to their needs, and specialize in very formulaic combat. They act only to assimilate and learn.
- **The Taken:** The Taken are members of other races who have been warped by the Darkness after being "taken" by one of the Hive Gods. They serve the Darkness through the will of the Hive God that took them, and thus will often be seen in

conjunction with and working alongside Hive enemies. Each unit possesses a special ability ranging from homing projectiles to a defensive bubble.

## **Breakdown**

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Destiny 2's main conflict revolves around the ultimate goal of reclaiming the city from the game's villain, Ghoul, but this classic revenge story ultimately falls flat because of the lack of established player motivation. Conflict only works in the presence of a desire, but the only real reason the player has to reclaim the city is that everyone, including the game itself, keeps telling them to do so. At no point is the player given a clear idea of what is actually being lost, since the city is never shown functioning normally. In addition, the lack of any visible human or emotional cost leaves any destruction feeling empty and meaningless. Sure, the physical damage wreaked upon the city is wasteful, but since no one is visibly suffering as a result, it might as well have been empty the entire time. Refugees are mentioned verbally, but never actually seen or heard in game. Because of the disconnect between themselves and the city, Destiny 2 leaves the player with no personal motivation to ever resolve the game's central conflict behind the intrinsic gameplay objective of completion.

Most of the secondary conflicts also largely fall flat. The major secondary conflict is the player's loss of their powers at the hands of Ghoul. Both the narrative and gameplay motivations to resolve this conflict are actually extremely good: narratively, the player losing their powers leaves them vulnerable, tapping into a primal fear of death and sense of weakness. Gameplay wise, the loss suddenly cuts off a number of verbs, taking away the player's ability to throw grenades, use abilities, sprint, double jump, and respawn. By doing so, Destiny 2 establishes a very powerful incentive to reclaim one's powers - only to then immediately give back in their entirety at the end of the third mission of the game. This sudden, easy resolution diffuses any sense of narrative and personal tension and, being a coincidence that benefits the hero, also feels cheap and artificial. The decision to return the player's powers so soon begs the question of why they were even taken away in the first place. So little time is devoted to the sensation of powerlessness that it might as well have not been in the game to begin with.

Each patrol zone also has its own miniature conflict tied into the main narrative, but for the most part they merely detract from or slow down the main conflict. The first patrol zone, the European Dead Zone, is especially egregious in this regard as the time spent in it resolving the local conflict serves no narrative purpose. The game's inciting incident occurs with the invasion of the city in the first few seconds of the game, but the first plot point, wherein the player truly begins their quest to reclaim the city and resolve the main conflict, only occurs when the player decides to help Commander Zavala a full 100 minutes later. The nearly two-hour long wait between these two moments is spent helping Suraya Hawthorne and Devrim Kay establish communications with faceless refugees. Although the objectives in the European Dead Zone are noble, they do nothing to advance the main conflict, and instead merely sap focus and lower tension. The European Dead Zone also introduces the Farm, a makeshift social space that fulfils all of the

gameplay functions offered by the what was the city, further reducing the player's motivation to save it.

The next patrol zone is Saturn's moon, Titan, wherein the player must help Commander Zavala and Deputy Commander Sloane establish a control center by clearing out enemies, restoring power, and decrypting some intercepted transmissions. Of the patrol zones, Titan's story missions best comply with and contribute to the main conflict, although the accomplishment of setting up a command center falls short since all missions thereafter use the Farm as the de facto base of operations. Only Deputy Commander Sloane remains in the control center, which suggests that Titan was developed before or concurrently with the European Dead Zone and the Farm only for the two to be smashed together at some point.

The third patrol zone is a frozen planetoid known as Nessus, where the player must free Cayde-6 from a teleportation loop with Failsafe's help. Of the four patrol zones, Nessus has by far the most self-contained and focused secondary narrative, which makes it both the strongest standalone section of the game and the weakest with respect to the campaign. Nessus is tighter and more enjoyable, but at the same time feels somewhat dissonant with the rest of the game. For example, Nessus has a wacky and comedic tone that works excellently within itself, but clashes heavily with the serious and dejected tone of the rest of the campaign. On the other hand, the narrative and expository value of Nessus is far greater due to the fact that it doesn't have to worry about answering to and sharing possibility space with the unrelated narrative of the main conflict.

The fourth and final patrol zone is Jupiter's moon, Io, where the player helps Ikora Rey get over an existential crisis and then helps Asher Mir clear out enemies and scan the Almighty so that a plan of action can be formed to combat it. Io is perfectly passable, but largely forgettable, save for the mysterious gigantic bones scattered all over its surface. And this leads to another note about the patrol zones: most fail to capitalize on the opportunities for environmental storytelling made available in each. Each patrol zone is a massive area filled with plenty of interesting and minute details, like the giant bones, and yet no effort was placed into giving those details meaning. What is the history that gives the bones context? Are there any other details near the bones that tell an unspoken story? No, the bones merely exist, much like many of the other details present in the open worlds. Effectively, had the patrol zones been reverted to their greybox forms before release, very little would be lost in terms of storytelling.

Once all patrol zones are introduced, the focus shifts to the Almighty, Ghaul's giant sun-destroying superweapon - because apparently, he has a superweapon. Although the actual process of taking out the Almighty is exciting, well-structured, and might even be the best level in the game, the Almighty's introduction exists as the game's most prominent example of poor exposition. The player, having collected a super-powered CPU to decrypt intercepted transmissions back on Titan, heads to the heart of a massive artificial city known as the New Pacific Arcology in an exciting, heroic escape sequence and the game's first vehicle section. After this peak, the player is then immediately shown a dejected and upsetting cutscene that suddenly and without warning introduces

the Almighty. Until this point, there have been no hints seeding the existence of a superweapon - it is simply dropped into the player's lap. The sudden shift from the emotional high of the arcology escape sequence to the effective abyss in the Almighty's introduction is by far the most painful instance of tonal whiplash in the game.

Finally, with the Almighty out of the way, the player is able to join their allies in an attack on the city and work their way up to face Ghaul. After a short build up, it is revealed that Ghaul has taken power from the Traveler, which means that he is now, much like the guardians, theoretically immortal. Despite this major roadblock, the player manages to match him in what is sure to be a lengthy bout of combat, only for the Traveler to suddenly and inexplicably free itself and kill Ghaul for good. Firstly, something has to be said of the almost poetic nature of the deus ex machina being a literal machine god. Secondly, up until this point the Traveler has been supposedly dead, and it is rather hard to believe that it coming back to life would perfectly align with this climactic moment.

Beyond the ending, Ghaul himself is also somewhat of a letdown. His first appearance actually sets the bar rather high: he appears menacingly and makes quick work of the player, first by taking their powers and then by punching them off his ship. Unfortunately, this concludes the list of things Ghaul does until his boss fight at the end of the game, highlighting the major problem with his implementation. After his actions in the first cutscene, Ghaul never actually does anything other than wander around on his ship in cutscenes, angrily questioning the Speaker while arguing with the Consul. Beyond this, actions and items are merely attributed to him verbally, without any in-game story evidence. For example, the Almighty is attributed to Ghaul in its introduction, and yet he never even references it. The Red Legion are his minions, and yet it is clear that they all act on their own accord. Ghaul is divorced from the majority of the storyline, leaving him as a passive villain who, rather than take matters into his own hands, simply seems to take credit for events as they unfold before him. He never once reaches out to taunt or impede the player, and because of this, fails to be a credible threat.

At the same time, Ghaul is probably the best example of the tragedy of Destiny 2's storytelling potential going to waste. Ghaul, as it turns out, has a deep and expansive backstory as detailed in his character description above. This information adds a large amount of depth to Ghaul that certainly could have made up for, at least to some degree, his poor implementation as a villain. However, all of this rather important developmental information is never actually presented to the player. Instead, it is squared away in item descriptions and lore cards and left for the player to dig out on their own, hence why the characters all feel so flat.

Destiny 2 actually has deep, intricate, and interesting backstories for its characters, worlds, and universe, with all, at least in writing, being nowhere near as flat as they appear in game. However, rather than focus expository efforts on valuable and important information that adds much needed value to the game, Destiny 2 instead elects to store it all in item descriptions. The reasoning behind this appears to be based entirely on the process of elimination: the dialogue is sloppy and thus wasted on delivering plot

exposition, with character traits only ever shining through on a topical level. Characters and objects never move or take action on their own, so visual storytelling is heavily crippled as a result. Gameplay exposition is largely impossible due to the game's insistence on keeping things simple, resulting in the only two ways of meaningfully interacting with the world being gunfire and the occasional contextual button prompt. Environmental storytelling, as noted above, is few and far between, and thus all that remains is item descriptions and lore. And hence, because all other forms of exposition are either squandered or underdeveloped, all information is located in the lore.

## **Strongest Element**

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Nessus is by far the narrative highlight of the game. Unlike the other patrol zones, the flawed main storyline is kept far away as the player chases Cayde-6 in an attempt to free him from a Vex teleportation loop. In the process, the player meets Failsafe, who helps, but does so begrudgingly since she already knows that Cayde-6 is bad news. Since the player's only goal on Nessus relating to the main storyline is freeing Cayde-6, this leaves a rather large swath of narrative possibility space to be taken up by other aspects of the story - possibility space that is immediately used to develop the history and current situation on Nessus.

This focus on developing the patrol zone gives Nessus a unique aspect of life not present in the other patrol zones. Although environmental storytelling is largely still just as flat as in the rest of the game, the valuable context given by Failsafe during the quieter moments of the campaign missions does wonders to make Nessus feel real. For example, Failsafe explains that she once functioned as the AI for a ship called the Exodus Black, which crashed into Nessus after it was mysteriously accelerated towards the planet by an unknown force. As a result, when the player wanders through the patrol zone and sees a valley covered in large scraps of metal that look like ship pieces, they can now reasonably assume that the valley was carved out by the violent impact of the Exodus Black. Compare this to the context-lacking bones on Io.

## **Unsuccessful Element**

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In Destiny 2, the player is merely a vessel for the needs of other characters. The player character is invariably silent, with their ghost functioning as a surrogate mouthpiece. Conversations often see characters talk to the player, only for the player's ghost to respond while the player character stands in the background awkwardly gawking at the conversation. Although this is likely a budget issue, the player's literal lack of a voice subconsciously communicates that the player has no narrative voice, effectively making them an empty golem to serve the voices of others. This is made worse by the fact that the repetitive combat-focused gameplay loop can now be interpreted as the player doing other characters' dirty work, rendering them as nothing more than attack dogs. The player does not choose to reclaim their powers, the Traveler tells them to. The player does not

choose to help the refugees, the game forces them to. The player does not choose to go to Titan, their ghost tells them to. The player's silence also often leads to goofy or ridiculous moments that clash heavily with the tone of their scenes. Infamously, when Ghoul first takes the player's powers away, he also kicks the player's ghost off of the edge of his quarterdeck. In response, the player reaches out and goofily mimes a scream, ruining what should be an impactful moment. Because of their silence, the player, who should be the hero of the story and the conduit through which one can act out a power fantasy, ends up feeling passive and weak.

## Highlight

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Destiny 2 does not possess any particular moment that stood out as excellent with respect to its narrative. The emotional climax of the game is arguably the mission on the Almighty, however, this excitement stems entirely from the level's spectacle rather than any particularly good writing.

## Critical Reception

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The critical reception of Destiny 2's narrative was largely neutral, but in a vague and non-specific way. Gamespot's Kallie Plagge notes the "Derivative story is just enough to be functional" as the game's only major negative point, whereas IGN's Destin Legarie notes the game's "story-driven campaign good enough to match its finely tuned first-person shooter gameplay". What seems to unify reviews of Destiny 2's narrative is that most reviews spend very little time actually focusing on it.

## Lessons

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- Keep things in scope. A smaller narrative featuring a handful of characters and the fate and history of a small area can be far more impactful and powerful than a vast space opera about overcoming insurmountable odds. The fate-of-the-world stakes presented by Ghoul, the Almighty, and the Red Legion were nowhere near as effective at keeping the player's attention as the simple story of Failsafe being happy to see signs of human life after 700 years of loneliness, only to discover how personally hazardous that human life could be.
- Make sure to capitalize on the narrative possibility space provided by level environments. Use more structured and direct storytelling methods like missions to provide important context, and then use the details in the world to provide depth and payoff to that context. If possible, then reward players for investigating by adding unique interactions only discoverable through said investigation. Bungie has already seen how effective this can be in engaging players, as the glowing player reception of Destiny 2: Forsaken's Dreaming City patrol zone proves. Unlike any of the patrol zones offered by Destiny 2's base game, the Dreaming City is rife with secret interactions that require players to explore and

think creatively, and as a result, it is largely regarded as Destiny's best patrol zone yet by many of the game's players.

- If anything, smaller narratives should gradually add up to a greater narrative, rather than the other way around. Destiny 2 tries to make a larger narrative play into a series of smaller narratives and then fold back to the larger narrative, and as a result all feel underdeveloped, rushed, and unfocused. Instead, have smaller stories stand on their own, and then gradually introduce elements that fold and play into a greater narrative.

## **Summation**

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Destiny 2 possesses an incredible universe filled with interesting lore just waiting to be used to its full potential. Unfortunately, the releases of Destiny and Destiny 2 have been largely plagued with a failure to deliver on these expectations. Because of the massive rift between story potential and reality, Destiny 2 is a bit of a curiosity, and that is reason enough in and of itself to examine it under a critical lense to understand what does and does not work in the context of such as game. Although Destiny 2's enjoyable and addictive gameplay loop will keep it afloat for years to come, it can never take its rightful place as the end-all space opera until the full storytelling potential of its universe is brought to the forefront, and the first step to achieving that goal is comprehending how that potential best shines through.