Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Dragon Age
Platform: PC, and Xbox 360
Genre: RPG
Release Date: November 3, 2009
Developer: Bioware
Publisher: Electronic Arts
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Overview

Dragon Age Origins is the original IP produced by Bioware, and published by EA.
Dragon Age's world of Thedeas is a dark, violent, medieval styled, fantasy world that
periodically falls under the vast and looming threat of the Blight. The Blight heralds the
return of an Archdemon accompanied by vast hordes of monsters known as Darkspawn.
In this world only an order of men and women known as the Grey Wardens, stand
between the Blight and the rest of the world. After being torn from the only life he has
ever known, and suffering a terrible defeat at the hands of the Darkspawn, the player and
his allies are the only things that stand between the world and the Blight.

The progression of the game occurs under the shadow of the Blight's strengthening
influence, and even on the map, the dark area spreads as a constant reminder of the
overwhelming threat. The combat and gameplay is familiar to anyone who has played
some of Bioware's other titles. Combat is reminiscent of Neverwinter Nights and more
distantly Baulder's Gate. The dialogue options run more akin to Mass Effect in terms of
variety. Establishing origins for the player characters allows for the existence of limited
"touchstone" characters connecting the player to their individual narrative.

Characters

- **Player Character** – A newly initiated Grey Warden; Regardless of the player's
  chosen origin, the player loses the old life he possessed for a second chance as a
  Grey Warden. Unlike other parts of the game that call on the player to make a
  decision, this sacrifice is not of the player's free will.

- **Morrigan** – A party member; she is the daughter of Flemmeth, the famed and
  feared witch of the wild. She remains emotionally distant from the conventional
  feelings of civilized folk, holding them in contempt. She sees the emotions
  common to those around her as a weakness and can only be convinced otherwise

through dialogue and continued player investment. As Morrigan becomes fond of the player character she comments that she never had what she would call a friend before now.

- **Leliana** – A party member; She belonged to a notorious class of spies known as Orlesian Bards, and she arguably one of the most complicated characters in the game. She was a former instrument of Marjolaine, a strong but ultimately manipulative mother figure. Leliana fled her old life, wounded and afraid and took refuge with the chantry. She later claimed to have visions of the blight that served as a call to battle. Visions, she told her fellow sisters, which were of the Maker in origin. The claim did not make her popular in a church that claimed the maker to be absent from the world. Obvious parallels exist between her and Joan of Arc. There are significant differences, however. Leliana also deserves special note here as being one of the world's only optimistic and altruistic characters.

- **Alistair**- A new, but not as new as the player character, Grey Warden; Alistair serves as the comedic relief, an emotional connection to the political machinations of Fereldan that occur late in the game, though as a victim of them. Alistair also wears the hat of mentor. Alistair shares a similar defense mechanism with Zevran in that he deflects uncomfortable issues with humor. The public found him to be an appealing character, and as a funny character, in some instance literally, being dragged to a throne he doesn't even want Alistair is a sympathetic character.

- **Zevran** – A party member; He leaves the Antivian Crows, an order of elite assassins embroiled in the political machinations of Antiva. Superficially, he is chipper and endearing but through player investigation, he can reveal one of the darker, and more tragic story arcs. A parallel is easily drawn between Zevran and characters from Bioware's other games. Krios of Mass Effect 2 is another death-seeking assassin out for atonement for actions he regrets.

- **Sten** - A party member; A giant from another land with a vastly different culture that espouses a warrior tradition and strict class restrictions. The public found Sten frustrating to deal with. This makes sense. Sten finds himself surrounded by an alien culture. In this sense, he is written well and the player can be rewarded for being patient. Sten is themeatically comparable to Mandalore, of knights of the old republic, or Wrex of Mass Effect.

- **Loghain** - The human antagonist; he achieves the distinction of a being a complicated antagonists because he believes that what he is doing is best for his nation. However, Loghain suffers an obviously affliction of paranoia and contempt for foreign meddling. Compounded with the belief that he is the only one who can save his country from the blight and from Orlesian meddling, real or imagined, Loghain emerges late game as a tragic and tormented figure.

- **The Archdemon** - The major end game antagonist; a fallen Tevinter god corrupted inexorably by the Darkspawn. The only answer to his suffering is the

mutual destruction of the Archdemon and the Grey Warden who casts the killing blow.

Breakdown

The principal themes pervasive throughout the games narrative are sacrifice, but not always in the altruistic sense found in other titles, and the violation of one's own will. Indeed, the mantra, "In war, victory; in peace, vigilance; in death, sacrifice," neatly summarize the games major theme.

The player sees these themes play out numerous times through the course of the game. It is seen in Orzzamar, where the player comes across an obsessed paragon willing to sacrifice everything that made her what she was, or when he comes across a mad dwarf who insists you tell his mother he has died to save her from shame. It's apparent in the Circle of Mages where a group of mages pay brutally in attempt to over throw their oppressors in the Chantry, to Loghain himself who compromises everything that makes his nation what it is in the name of saving it. The theme is sometimes subtle, with party members finally relinquishing their pasts, or their hopes, but it runs deeply throughout the game's narrative.

Six different character origins are available during character creation, and the player chooses from one of the following: Dwarven Commoner, Dwarven Noble, Daelish Elf, City Elf, Human noble, human mage. The origins exert a long lasting effect on the game's story at different points, but not in the same earth-shattering context that some of the other choices the player makes.

The player leaves whatever origin they have selected, complying with the obligatory call to adventure found across the broad range of popular mediums. Dragon Age's call to adventure universally touches on the game theme of sacrifice and precludes any chance of returning to his origin in any capacity. In the course of the game he may find himself returning to elements of his origin; characters, physical settings, the only exception being the Daelish Elf origin. These connections, however, serve as touchstones that measure the player's disposition towards their origin. The story does a good job of reinforcing the idea of an inexorable disconnect of the world the player came from, first through the joining and later through revelations about the nature of the Grey Wardens and the taint.

This unwilling disconnect finds a mirror in the Grey Warden's major antagonist, the Archdemon. Superficially, the Archdemons lead the Blight. The in game Codex describes The Archdemons as old Tevinter gods, cast down deep beneath the earth by the more popular, and seemingly benevolent Maker. These gods, once described as beautiful, become Archdemons when the Darkspawn find them and they are unwillingly and irreversibly transformed by the taint. After that point only the mutual destruction of both the Archdemon and a Grey Warden will put the twisted, agonized god out of his misery. Loghain also suffers a metaphorically similar disconnect and corruption, becoming distant from his daughter and Ferelan as it exists today. His corrupting influence is Arl

Howe and a crippling paranoia compounded by the belief that everyone else is too weak to take the morally ambiguous actions necessary to save his beloved country.

For the Archdemon and the player, this cycle of unwilling self-destruction and renewal can only potentially broken by Morrigan's offer to perform a ritual allowing the tortured god to find a new life in the form of a child; and for the player, a second chance at living his own. The player, however, does not have access to this knowledge until the eve of the final battle. This decision and its implications are covered a little later in the document.

Before the player knows any of this, he departs from his origin story to Ostagar with Duncan, an obvious mentor figure and rescuer. Duncan by his nature and kindness is thoroughly ingratiated to the player when the campaigns human antagonist, Loghain, reveals himself in a betrayal that results in Duncan's and the King Calin's death. From there the player spends most of the game gathering an army to replace the destroyed army lost at Ostagar, while working towards Loghain's overthrow.

The player helps four principal groups to build his army, the Daelish Elves, The circle of Mages, Redcliff, and the Dwarven Kingdom of Orzzamar. At each location a series of quest are required to earn the loyalty and support of each faction. In the case of the Elves, the dwarves and the Circle, major choices present themselves that affect what type of army joins the player later in the final battle. This is a great example of the kind of choices not frequent in RPGs.

The player eventually journeys to Denerim for a Landsmeet as part of the Arl of Redcliff's plan to depose Loghain and put a stop to the in-fighting that resulted from Loghain's betrayal of King Calin. From there the Arl ask the player to make an important choice. The player must mediate, and choose who sits on the throne of Fereldan. It's a large choice with significant impact not just on the story, but on mechanics as it regards to available player characters. Even though it is a dramatic choice, it's one supported by the writing and intrigue up to that point and certainly allows the player to feel immersed and instrumental to the world.

The game's urgency increases when, after returning from the Landsmeet to battle the Darkspawn at Redcliff the player learns that his enemy has actually opted to march straight for Denerim. Thousands of lives are at stake and the Darkspawn have a significant lead.

The game culminates in the ultimate choice. The player can either sacrifice himself, sacrifice another warden or agree to Morrigan's ritual. An epilogue screen appears after the conclusion of the game and informs the player of what happened to the world of Fereldan and each of the party members. These stories can differ greatly depending on the player's actions and if the player lives, he can even further influence these choices in a short dialogue discussing his future plans following the Darkspawn's defeat.

Ultimately, Dragon Age: Origins is an ambitious title with an immersive, richly detailed world. It works principally because the characters are driven by their own motivations regardless of whether or not, or to what extent if any, they are tangled up in the way that lighter fiction would engender.

Strongest Element

The real distinguishing feature of the title is that actions and dialogue influence other characters in a way that implies thoughtful and careful crafting. This imparts a sense of instrumentality *with* the other characters, and imparts a feeling of realism and meaning within the context of the world.

"Character-driven" has become a buzzword in the field of digital art, but Dragon Age is *actually* worthy of that descriptor. Party characters have their own motivations and viewpoints that the player can influence, but not impose will over. It's this limited sense of player agency, that still offers more depth that other game that have offered promises of important choices, that makes Dragon Age stand out. Through this strong characterization the player feels like a part of the party character's journey and, as a result, the world they occupy.

This agency that the player can cultivate with the other characters is not like the control or the reaction seen in other games, but is more of an instrumentality, a sense of meaning that helps define not only the world but the player, and his potential place in it. The player can choose to have meaning to the characters. This compounded with the choices he can make allow him to feel instrumental to the world and form a vibrant tapestry for the player to exists in, that other games that simply offer the player a multitude of min-games and superficial choices can never hope to achieve.

The strongest element of Dragon Age is that the players do not have complete and total control over the party members. The player character can influence other party members, especially through the use of character specific quests, but the characters are written and perform in such a way that it seems they have their own agenda and opinions on the world and their places in it. Party characters with their own motivations do not rely on the tired old trope of making the NPCs feel like a part of the player's journey, rather it makes the player feel like he was a part of their journey, and subsequently their world

A shining example of this is Morrigan's end game behavior and the foreshadowing leading up to it. The player can be fond of her, he can even reach a point where Morrigan feels attached to him, possibly even love him, but that will not change what Morrigan does in the end. This is not a flaw, but rather good writing. Morrigan does not show a complete lack of regret, often the dialogue is poignant and remorseful, but it does not change Morrigan's identity, and what she has been planning to do, what she feels she must do in the end game.

For example, the player can insult her, drive her off, and mistreat Morrigan, but she returns and continues to come back to the party, not for the stock motivation of loyalty, or

for the mechanical reason of giving the player the illusion of choice, but because the player has something she wants. It is, however, important that the player have the option of driving Morrigan off and just as important that the character respond realistically within the context of the world and of the character.

Other characters also display goals that the player can cater to or ignore. Alistair wants a sense of family that he has been missing for most of his adult life. Leliana wants to feel secure, and hold on to the beliefs of a hopeless romantic. If the player becomes involved with these characters, and their well-written aspirations they feel involved, as if they have meaning to those characters. It can feel gratifying to the player and further connect him to the world and overall narrative. Through these strong characters, Dragon Age is the most like character-driven fiction of a traditional medium than any other title on the market today.

Unsuccessful Element

Dragon Age suffers from some poor cinematic choice near the end that strains the credulity of the narrative. This is a shame because some of the dialogue presented during these segments are the most powerful in the game.

When the player takes the gates at Denerim and decides which party members to take with him to face the Archdemon, believability suffers as each, and every possible party member gives a brief min-monologue to the player wishing him well and expressing trepidation for the player's well being.

In this instance, the player essentially gets what he pays for. His emotional investment in the various characters, the completion of said characters quest, and approval rating can lead to some heart-rending dialogue. Nevertheless, the player's immersion is in danger of cracking under the conga line progression of well-wishers.

In a similar vein, Alistair gives a speech near the end of the game. Ostensibly, Alistair is giving this speech to motivate an army, but the speech is more of an itemization of what the player has accomplished to date. This inexplicable honoring of the player can be gratifying, but it doesn't feel natural at that point and was probably more appropriate somewhere else, perhaps at the landsmeet or perhaps if he had otherwise stated a desire to honor the player before launching into his speech.

Highlight

The highlight of the game centers on the events at the battle of Denerim and actually includes one of the games weaker elements. As stated earlier, just after the player takes the gate at Denerim, selects his party members to enter the city and hunt the Archdemon. Shortly after a heartwarming moment occurs where each character tells the player what they feel going into the final battle. Though it strains credulity to have a conga line of party members pass and give the obligatory "I am mildly concerned speech, it's been a long road, you mean x and y to me." The dialogue takes on a greater significance if the

player has maintained a friendship with Morrigan. Nothing the player can say or do can convince Morrigan to stay after the battle concludes, and if you are on good terms with Morrigan it can be a genuinely painful moment that leads to a potential argument.

At the end of the final battle, the player can opt to sacrifice himself or another Grey Warden, if he did not choose to allow Morrigan to conduct her ritual. This singular choice has meaningful consequences that range from breaking a party member's heart to depriving a nation of its king.

Critical Reception

Dragon Age Origins enjoyed critical and commercial success.
Metacritic gave Dragon Age a score of 91 out of 100. They hailed it as the spiritual successor of Bauldur's Gate. GameSpy.com gave the title an 8.8 and the main IGN main site gave Dragon Age: Origins an "Editor's Choice" award and a solid rating of 8.7.

GameSpy's Geralad Villoria stated in his review, "After logging over a hundred hours on Dragon Age: Origins, I still want to continue playing. I want to unearth more of its secrets, to better know its characters, to see how the decisions I make can impact its world, and yes, to see more of its endings." Dragon Age follows the tradition of great fiction with interesting characters. In a liminal field that incorporates elements of other mediums this title, more than any other recent entry, has actually managed to use its rich detail and depth to engage the player and make him a part of the story, instead of placating him with meaningless min-games and distractions.

IGN.com's Jeff Haynes further validates Bioware's commitment to characterization when he wrote, "Bioware fleshed out its customary design by including radically different characters with unique backgrounds for gamers to experience. The result is that Dragon Age dwarfs other role-playing games in size and scale, and weaves in mature themes amidst a backdrop of chaos and destruction."

Lessons

- Dragon Age is character-driven through the party members that support the player, and in so doing allow him to feel like a character in the story himself. The player can affect the party members in profound but subtle ways. Through relationships, through approval, or disapproval he party member's perception of the player and to an extent the very world they occupy can change. The game's writing is not just about accommodating the player, and because of this, the player is the one who ultimately benefits.

- If the player is important, allow him to make the "big" choices, but earn those choices with the story. The player decides who is king, he decides the composition of two of the factions providing him soldiers, but nothing he can do can prevent Alistair from leaving if he spares Loghain, even if this results in Alistair's execution. Likewise, there can never be a satisfying reason that allows Leliana to forgive the player for desecrating the ashes of Andraste. It speaks very

well of Bioware as game designers that the player has these choices, it speaks volumes of them as writers that some of these choices have profound and irreparable consequences in both game and story.

- If the player is allowed to make sweeping choices, let them have consequences in game. In the game the player decides wither or not to allow the dwarves to recover the morally questionable technology of creating golems. The player's actions determine if an army of dwarves or an army of devastating once-dwarves come to his aid and will have reproductions on the geopolitical climate of Thedeas for generations to come. Similarly, the player can choose to break a long-standing curse or allow it to spread for a more powerful werewolf army. An example of a game that fails to do this would be Fable II. Fable II by contrast barrages the player with a slew of meaningless choices and side quest, one of the most memorable, a series of quest where the player either sides with the church of Light, or darkness has no consequence or impact on the game. It was a mini game masquerading as a grand sweeping quest.

- The most important lesson other game developers can take away from Dragon age is not only to write characters and situations well, but also to bind up these things with gameplay. Alistair either can become a king, a figurehead, a drunk or face execution as the pawn of political machinations. This is, reliant upon choices the player makes throughout, and these meaningful, high stakes choice that keep the player engaged. On a smaller scale the approval system demonstrated by Dragon Age, was a satisfying way to unlock more dialogue and it had actual impact on gameplay; not only in story but also in bonuses provided in combat.

Summation

Dragon Age is a carefully crafted narrative with strong writing and characterization. It is one of the first titles that actually brings the player in as a character, operating with other characters instead of just responding to them or imposing their will upon them. In so doing, the title brings meaning to player choices, instead of simply bombarding them with faux choices and meaningless min-games. In a medium that seeks to incorporate the player as a character and engage him, Dragon Age sets an excellent example for other developers to follow and invent from. Dragon Age is simply the closest this medium has to offer in terms of character-driven fiction.