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Game Characters as Narrative Devices. A Comparative Analysis of *Dragon Age: Origins* and *Mass Effect 2*

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In the past year, a number of games have been released that focus on interesting characters and their development. Titles such as *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream 2010), *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar 2010), *Mass Effect 2* (Bioware 2010), and *Dragon Age: Origins* (Bioware 2009) are games that let the players get under the skin of characters as we get to know their motivations, ambitions, sorrows, and fears. Through this strategy, the games have been able to step a little bit closer to implementing narratives into games in an interesting way, creating deeper involvement through characters and emotions (Bizzocchi 2008, p.4-5).

In *Heavy Rain* and *Red Dead Redemption,* the player is put in the role of the protagonist character. In *Red Dead Redemption*, the consequence of this design decision is that the character development happens exclusively in cut-scenes, with the effect that what the player character says in cut-scenes and what he does in play sequences differ widely. *Heavy Rain*, on the other hand, has chosen the path of an "interactive narrative," with the consequence of restricting freedom of action in order to make the player follow a given path towards the goal.

Bioware has taken a different approach in *Mass Effect 2* (*ME2*) and *Dragon Age: Origins (DAO),* however*.* Instead of relying on player characters, these games focus on the development of supporting characters. The effect is games that are able to integrate interesting narratives into game play. By equipping supporting characters with agendas of their own, the games have allowed a coherent narrative experience that is dependent on the motivations of supporting characters instead of that of the player character. These games are not the first to use supporting characters to power narrative progression. Bioware has been at the forefront of making narrative-heavy role-playing games where character development is the focus, with early successes like *Baldur's Gate II* (2002) and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (2003).

Another interesting example that follows this idea is the game/art project *Façade* (2005) by Stern and Mateas in which the players become involved in an emotional drama unfolding between their friends. Through written input, players have to navigate the conflict, which ends in the escalation or descent of the argument and a change in the pair's lives. While the player's role is as a moderator in the conflict, the dramatic development depends on the pair's emotional responses to the player and each other. This approach is not very different from what *DAO* and *ME2* do, as all three games set the player character aside to let supporting characters be the progressive powers of narrative.

In this article I will present a comparative analysis of how characters are used as narrative tools in Bioware's computer role-playing games *Dragon Age: Origins* (*DAO*)

Eludamos Vol. 4, No. 2 (2010)
p. 315-331

and *Mass Effect 2* (*ME2*). Through this analysis, I will demonstrate how sophisticated narrative features can be integrated into gameplay through the development of interesting characters. I have chosen to do a comparative analysis between these two titles as they demonstrate different approaches to using characters as narrative tools within the same genre, while also incorporating these narrative features tightly into gameplay. These two approaches to character design seem to be consciously chosen by Bioware in order to test out the success of different ways of using characters as carriers of narrative progression, and this article attempts to analyze these techniques.

Setups and Game Mechanics

Developed by Canadian studio Bioware and published by Bioware owner EA Games, *DAO* and *ME2* are both available on the PC, Xbox 360, and PS3. The games were released three months apart; *DAO* in November 2009 and *ME2* in February 2010. Both are marketed as computer role-playing games (CRPG), a genre which is characterized by a multitude of different kinds of games and subgenres. Historically related to table-top role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, the CRPG is recognized by a focus on character development and often set in an epic or mythical fictional universe (Poole 2007, p. 76). While action-oriented computer role-playing games such as *Diablo* (Blizzard 1996) celebrate the character's acquisition of new physical skills and equipment, and massively multiplayer online role-playing games focus on social interaction through an avatar (Wolfendale 2007), Bioware's games are story-driven and focus on playing the role of a fictional character and making choices from that character's perspective (Fine 1983, p.4). The players take part in the progression of events by selecting options through dialogue trees in which different dialogue options lead to different branching paths (Rollings & Adams 2003, p. 469). Dialogue with supporting characters is for that reason the best way to get quest-related information as well as personal knowledge about characters. Since decision-making also happens through dialogues in most cases, this is also a good mechanic for creating ethical and emotional dilemmas.

DAO and *ME2* involve characters on a more immediate level than mere information providers. During the game, players will recruit a number of non-playing characters (NPCs), and bring a group of these *companions* out on missions. In practice, this means that in combat, the player may also control the other group members' tactical actions. In each game, there are two important mechanics that guide the relationship between companions and the player character (PC). *DAO* uses an *approval rating* system that defines how well a companion gets along with the PC. This rating changes depending on the players' choice of actions, as well as how they treat the companion in question. If the approval rating reaches a certain level, the companion will present the PC with a *personal quest* which further contributes to developing the relationship between them. *ME2* has similar mechanics. Every companion presents the PC with a *personal mission* that when completed will increase their *loyalty* level from normal to loyal. Loyalty unlocks special abilities, decides whether or not a companion is available for romance, and how that companion will perform during the end game mission.

In terms of setup for the storylines, both games are epic adventures about the fight against a greater evil. *DAO* is set in a medieval fantasy land of Ferelden, whereas *ME2* is a space odyssey set in the late twenty-second century. In *DAO*, the PC and the companion Alistair are the only surviving members of the warrior organization The Grey Wardens. The Wardens are the only ones capable of killing the Archdemon that threatens Ferelden. In *ME2*, the player takes the role of Commander Shepard. After an attack on their spaceship, Shepard is synthetically brought back to life by the pro-human terrorist organization Cerberus to save humankind from a predator life form.

In the following, I will first give an account of how characters are established and developed in these games. Then I will continue to discuss how the two games approach the PC. This is important because it gives us a comparative view of how the PC works as opposed to other characters. Also, the presentation of the player role is important for the degree of involvement with supporting characters. I will then go on to discuss supporting characters as narrative tools, with a specific focus on recruitable companions. I will discuss their role as carriers of the game narratives, and how this is woven into gameplay in *DAO* and *ME2*.

Building Interesting Game Characters

The recipe behind the success of implementing narrative in *DAO* and *ME2* is based on establishing interesting characters and making the plot unfold in conjunction with character development. As role-playing games, they leave the PCs relatively open for the player's interpretation, only leaving certain clues that point in the direction of a fictional individual. *DAO* and *ME2* instead focus on developing interesting companion characters, and on establishing bonds between them and the player.

Game developer Lee Sheldon argues for the use of characters as the driving narrative force in computer games (Sheldon 2004, p.31). Borrowing a term from screenwriting lingo, he calls all game characters that fuel progression and make the action move forward *pivotal characters* (Sheldon 2004, p.42-43). He argues that the protagonist PC or antagonist characters most often occupy pivotal roles, but states that sidekicks or companions also may take this position. An important narrative technique in *DAO* and *ME2* is to focus on companions in the role of pivotal characters by giving them considerable depth and development, and by closely associating them with the narrative progression. I will show that in these games companions are often more important for narrative progression than the PCs.

Game designer David Freeman agrees with Sheldon's approach to character, but focuses on the way characters can work as tools to create emotions in games (2004, p.38). His goal is to "move the player through an interlocking sequence of emotional experiences" (Freeman 2004, p.32), thus emphasising player emotions as the important experience in his games. Creating *empathy* between players and characters is important for this emotional bond (Freeman 2004, p.88, 102; Sheldon 2004, p.243-244). If we follow Smith's and Lankoski's understanding of empathy as adopted from cognitive psychology, empathy is the "adoption in a person of the mental states and emotions of some other person" (Smith 1995, p.95), or "processes that puts one's affects in relation to another's affects" (Lankoski 2007, p.6). I am not

going to outline a theory of empathy with game characters here, but I want to follow Lankoski's view that game characters, like other fictional characters, may produce the same empathic responses in people as real people do (Lankoski 2007, p.6; Morrison & Ziemke 2005). This means that the player establishes empathic relationships with companions in both games, and this is what creates the powerful narrative effect. The approach in *DAO* and *ME2* is to let the companions' personal development be central to the narrative progression of the game, and allow the creation of emotional bonds between companions and PC.

In order to create emotional bonds to and create empathy with characters, Freeman states that the characters must be deep and interesting. *Depth* refers to character complexity in terms of psychology and emotion, and *interesting* refers to the uniqueness, originality and imaginativeness of the character (Freeman 2004, p.34). These attributes are very prominent in connection with companion characters. *DAO* and *ME2* base companions on well-known templates and stereotypes, but make them interesting by giving them additional, and often surprising personality traits that are presented little by little throughout the game. Instead of fleshing out the uniqueness of a companion from the very beginning, the games use recognizable templates to ensure a familiar first impression. Psychological depth is then established through elaborate backstories, as well as character growth and development. Backstories have an important role in making the companions both deep and interesting, as their histories explain their attitudes and behaviour in ways that make them unique and original. Comparatively, these attributes have been downplayed in connection with the PCs. Depth is hinted at in dialogue options, as each option reflects a different attitude and emotion, but it is up to the player to fill in motivations behind the choices that the PC is making. The PCs are also made interesting only through the relationship to the companions in the games.

Another way to make characters psychologically deep and interesting is to make them go through personal growth and development. *Development* happens through the unveiling of latent potentials in the character, and character *growth* happens through changing or maturing together with the progression of the plot (Sheldon 2004, p.41-42). In *DAO* and *ME2*, companion growth and development primarily happen through personal quests and loyalty missions. After having successfully completed these missions, the companions will have a changed attitude towards life and towards the PC. By helping the companions with personal dilemmas, the player must make choices that emphasize the PC's personality. The growth and development of the PCs are limited to what the player lets it go through. For instance, early in the game the player may decide to make the PC a good guy that only makes altruistic choices, but later change that decision after encountering situations that need more complex evaluations. However, *DAO* also lets the PC go through individual growth through grounding it in one out of six "origin" introductions that serve as a fictional setup and motivational background for the PC. This will be further discussed below in the section on player characters.

It is necessary to point out that not only PCs and companions are important narrative tools in these titles. There are also non-playing characters outside player control that take pivotal roles. In both games, there are specific characters that are crucial for the progression of the narrative. The bonus of using such characters is that it allows the designers to prescript events in a way that puts them beyond the power of the player.

Thus the designers can make sure specific events will take place without making the player responsible for them. Instead the player must respond to these events, something which creates motivation for the player at the same time as it ensures that the players do whatever the designer wants them to without the action feeling forced. Due to the scope of this article, however, this will not be discussed any further.

Two Approaches to the Player Character

DAO and the *ME2* approach the PC in two different ways. The two approaches establish different kinds of relationships between player and PC. I believe that the relationship between player and PC in *DAO* is tighter than in *ME2*, and that this makes the player's involvement with characters different in the two games. This also has consequences for how the PCs work as a narrative tool.

The relationship between player and PC is a complex one in all games, and it can neither be seen simply as identification nor empathy. Due to the necessary control link there is always a certain connection between player and PC, although this will vary between games and genres. Salen & Zimmerman see the relationship between player and PC as one of hybrid or double consciousness of play, in which players remain completely aware that they are playing while also being conscious about the PC as an object to be manipulated according to the rules of the game (2004, p.453-455). Waggoner shows that there is no exception in computer role-playing games; here the relationship between player and PC is a complex, fluid and paradoxical one in which the two are separate, yet joined. Borrowing terminology from James Paul Gee, Waggoner argues that the formation of a "projected" identity is a process heavily influenced by real-world identities and game experience, and that it is hard to draw the line that decides where the real identity ends and the projected one begins (Waggoner 2009, p.156). He emphasizes that this kind of identity is not the same as the player's real world identity, yet neither is it similar to the virtual identity of the avatar one creates when chatting online (Waggoner 2009, p.15). Instead it is closer to what Waern (2010) describes as a "theoretical identity that the player wishes to be in the context of the game world". Role-playing studies talk about the *bleed effect* (Jeepforum n.d., Montola 2009, Waern 2010) between players and the roles they play. When role-playing, the players will never be able to fully separate between the two identities even when they intend to be "in character"; the real world thoughts and emotions will increasingly bleed into the role identity, and vice versa, thereby making the distinction between player and role more and more transparent (Waskul & Lust 2004, p.349). The bleed effect operates in both *ME2* and *DAO*, but I argue that it is stronger in *DAO* due to the presentation of the PC. This also affects the relationship that the player forms to companions in the two games.

As role-playing games, both games ask the player to play a role. However, these roles are of different natures in the two games. In the *ME* games, the PC is defined as a specific individual – the spaceship commander Shepard. Shepard is equipped with a voice, and all dialogues are shown using the shot-versus-shot technique, thereby letting the player see the PCs face and expressions in all conversations. By following the visual language of Hollywood cinema in cut-scenes, *ME2* presents Shepard much in the same way the film medium presents characters (Lankoski 2010, p.103), suggesting that Shepard resembles a film protagonist. Also, the dialogue tree

lets the player choose, not between specific lines but between conversation topics that Shepard verbally presents with their own words and intonation. This means that the *ME2* players decide the direction of Shepard's personality, but regardless of whether they choose to make the PC a "renegade" or a "paragon" or something in between, Shepard's appearance and voice-acting suggests that the PC is a charismatic and energetic commander with an attitude.

In *DAO*, however, the Warden does not come with such clear identity markers and the individuality is therefore made less specific. The Warden is not equipped with a voice and although everybody else talks in this game, the PC only communicates through the player's choice between a number of different written lines of dialogue from a dialogue tree. Most dialogues are also watched from over the Warden's shoulder. In the rare cases where the face is shown, lips never move and the expression is motionless. The players are therefore free to make their own interpretations of the Grey Warden's personality, how the PC sounds with respect to intonation and vocal tone, and of how the PC reacts emotionally in different situations.

The *DAO* origins are also an important feature that creates a stronger bond between player and PC compared to *ME2*. In *DAO* the player chooses between six introductions that serve as a fictional setup and motivational background for the PC. These have been designed to give the player a motivation to play the game by establishing understanding for the Warden's situation (Smith 1995, p. 84). This motivation is deeply rooted in the fiction of the game and contributes to the bleed effect between player and PC. All origins position the PC in a dramatic situation that is emotionally challenging and that will change the PC's life forever. The best example is perhaps the origin of the City Elf. By being forced to witness to their cousin being raped, the PC faces the moral dilemma of either taking revenge on the nobleman rapist with the consequence of letting the elven community suffer, or letting the rapist go after accepting a bribe. This choice is emotionally involving since the player must first witness a violation and then make an ethically difficult choice. But it is also experienced as more personal compared to a similar empathic situation in a film: it is the *player* who must make the moral decision, and the close relationship between player and PC makes the situation concern the player directly. In this situation the player's ethical perspectives are likely to bleed into the Grey Warden's ethical perspectives, creating a necessary moral allegiance between player and the PC (Lankoski 2010, p.106; Smith 1995, p.84, 188). By presenting situations with emotional impact, the origins thus make the player personally motivated not only to continue playing the game, but also out of revenge or in order to help the ones affected.

On the basis of the difference in PC presentation, *DAO* pursues the bleed effect to a greater degree compared to *ME2*. In *ME2*, the motivational setup is connected to the desire to follow the defined character Shepard's story and thus adopt the PC's goals and make them our own (Lankoski 2010, p.100). *DAO* goes even further by also making the player personally involved through highly emotional origin introductions. We can therefore say that in *ME2*, the player is put into the role of a defined *character*, namely Shepard, the coolest commander in the galaxy, while in *DAO* the PC is more of *a blank canvas* that the players can add a greater variety of personalities onto. In the first case, the PC is a fictional character; a human-like

subject with motivations, intentions and personality (Jørgensen 2009; Klevjer 2007, p.116) which the player is asked to embody and play the role of. In the second case, the PC is a vehicle that invites the player to take them on, as if they were in the specific situation themselves (Jørgensen 2009). In an interview with Pearce, game designer Tim Schafer explains this by stating that in some games, the goal is to create a PC that basically is an extension of the player into the game world, but in other games the ideal may be to have PCs that are "interesting enough that people want to jump inside *their* head" (Schafer in Pearce 2003). Rusch (2009) explains the two approaches as different ways to bridge the gap between PC and player. While one is based in bringing the PC closer to the player by portraying it as an amnesiac or a tabula rasa that the players add their own personality into, the alternative is that the game presents "strong independent socio-psychological" characters that players empathize with (Rusch 2009). While characters with independent personality establishes a relationship to the player based on embodiment (Klevjer 2007), goal-sharing (Lankoski 2010), and empathy (Lankoski 2010; Rusch 2009; Smith 1995), tabula rasae create a greater opportunity for *bleed* since there are few indications that the PC's inner life needs to be different from the player's.

It is important to emphasise that the description of Shepard as an independent character and the Grey Warden as a tabula rasa is exaggerated, at least compared to other genres. The Grey Warden is obviously not as blank as an unnamed terrorist in *Counter-Strike*, and Shepard is not as defined as *Red Dead Redemption*'s John Marston, who has opinions of his own and may pursue goals the player does not agree with. As role-playing characters, both PCs are still subject to the bleed effect. This polarized description still applies to point out that there is a difference between the two PCs in terms of how closely associated they are to the player. When describing player characters in general, however, the difference between the two character types should be seen as more relative and as a continuum between two extremes (Kromand 2007).

Companions as Narrative Tools

In the following section I provide two examples from each game of how companions are used as tools to convey narrative. These examples will be presented as four cases that illustrate the most central techniques that are used in pursuing companions as narrative devices in *DAO* and *ME2*. The focus in the analysis is on the interplay between the PC and companions and how they are positioned to each other in terms of narrative progression.

Although apparent from the cases below, it should be noted that cut-scenes and dialogue trees are not the only method through which companions work as tools for storytelling. The player's choice of actions in the game world also affects the game's conclusion, as well as the relationship to the different companions. The existing approval or loyalty of different companions also influences who the players decide to bring with them on missions. In *DAO* and also in the original *ME*, the player would also witness the "banter" of companions; informal chatter that emphasizes character depth, as well as suggesting that companions may also establish relations to each other and not only to the PC.

Case 1: Separating Player Character and Protagonist

In *DAO*, companions contribute to the narrative through adding emotional development to the game and by taking on important pivotal roles in the plot. If we understand *protagonist* as a character with has a driving goal that fuels narrative progression and which goes through personal development during the course of events (see, for instance, Abrams 1993, p.159), it is reasonable to claim that it is not the Grey Warden who is the protagonist in the narrative. Instead the PC is a supporting character for a more important person: Alistair, the bastard heir to the throne and the PC's fellow Grey Warden. There is no focus on the growth and development of the Grey Warden, and although it is the player who makes the most crucial decisions in the game, this is done from the position as the commander and the leader of a group. Of course, the origins try to make the game's mission personally relevant for the Warden, but it is putting Alistair on the throne that is in focus. The major plot events focus on him, and puts the Grey Warden in the position as the pivotal character, or a *foil* (see Abrams 1993, p.159), that must motivate Alistair, make sure he develops his potential as a leader and grow into becoming mature enough to accept the call to be king (Sheldon 2004, p.41-42). We can therefore say that *DAO* separates between a character that works as a mechanism in driving events forward (the Warden), and a character which is the centre of the narrative (Alistair). I will argue that removing the PC from the protagonist seat and giving it to another character is an interesting technique for game narratives, since it allows the developers to design for a narrative experience without having to rely on the player's involvement in the progression.

Of course, even though Alistair may be seen as the protagonist and progressive force of the plot, he cannot grow as an individual or develop as a leader figure without the support from the Grey Warden. This also implies that in many play-throughs, Alistair will not execute his potential due to a player's specific play-style and dialogue choices, and in such cases he may not appear as the protagonist. The *approval rating* game mechanic is important here: through being nice to Alistair in conversations and giving him gifts, the Grey Warden may befriend him and he will trust the PC with a personal quest. Completing this task will allow Alistair to develop in one of two directions: if the player through the quest is able to teach him about the hardships of life, he will eventually decide to motivate himself to claim the throne. However, if the player does not pursue Alistair's personal growth or chooses a different regent, he will not appear as protagonist, but instead as a man who was too weak and irresolute to utilize the potentials of his life.

However, regardless of how the player decides to treat Alistair, he has a dominating role towards the end of the game which may re-establish him as protagonist depending on the direction of events. The Landsmeet is the point of no return and climax of the plot, and is the event in which the nobles will choose their new regent. As the leading Grey Warden, the player may put Alistair on the throne. If the PC does not, depending on the circumstances some alternative outcomes are that Alistair claim the throne for himself, he feels betrayed and leaves the party, or is executed by the rival (Dragon Age Wiki 2010). Coupled with the bleed effect and the fact that an important part of the game play is to develop relations to companions, the events at the Landsmeet have a certain emotional and even traumatic impact on the player. There are several important decisions to be made that are ethically difficult and have great consequences for the end-game. Blood will be shed, or a major character

(arguably the protagonist) will leave. Having a central character abruptly leave the game or being killed is dramatic and the event is not likely foreseen by the first-time player.

Also post-Landsmeet events have a crucial impact on the resolution of the plot. Soon after Landsmeet it is revealed that the Grey Warden who kills the Archdemon must die. Since there are only two Grey Wardens left in Ferelden, one of them has to sacrifice themselves. Thus, the player faces an ethical dilemma: either committing suicide, or commanding somebody else to make the sacrifice. If Alistair is elected king, this would mean sacrificing the king. Playing as a female Warden romantically involved with Alistair, the dilemma will be even greater, as sacrificing one or the other means leaving the other behind. The strong bleed effect in the game amplifies the trauma of this dilemma (Waern 2010), making the climax of the plot not only ethically and empathically difficult, but also personally involving for the player. However, this choice is in itself interesting because it demonstrates that it is possible to have games that involves a situation that both Ryan (2001a) and Aarseth (2004, p.50) never thought they would see: that a game would make a player consider committing virtual suicide.

Giving the protagonist role to a character that is not the PC is an interesting and sophisticated way to present a narrative, but it has different consequences in games compared to traditional narrative media. In computer games, using a third person as a protagonist is a technique that opens the potential for interesting narratives. While computer games over the last 10-15 years have had the tendency to present the plot structure as episodic events by the use of cut-scenes or as quests (Jenkins 2004, p.123-124), following somebody else's story allows the player to experience a narrative without being the centre of attention oneself; not unlike how we experience film and literature. Using this technique, the game designers have a tool for presenting a narrative which progresses on *their* terms without having to worry about whether or not the player activity is going to ruin it (Jenkins 2004, p.125). By removing control over the narrative from the player, the designer remains on top of the presentation of information, thereby being able to give the player the necessary information at the right times through the protagonist. In one way, this approach is similar to traditional narratives in that the audience/player becomes the witness of the narrative, but at the same time it allows the player to take some part in its progression by making the player responsible for the growth and development of the protagonist. Since companions carry most of the narrative weight, the game designers have made it possible to tie narrative into game play by making growth and development game mechanics dependent upon player input.

Case 2: Pairing the Bleed Effect with Catharsis

Another character of crucial importance for the plot development is Morrigan, who in particular gains a pivotal role post-Landsmeet. Morrigan has her own reasons for joining the Warden's party. Her reasons are finally revealed in the end-game. After the player learns that a Grey Warden must sacrifice themselves to slay the Archdemon, Morrigan makes an interesting offer. Through a ritual she can make it so that nobody needs to die, but to do so she needs to be impregnated with the child of a Grey Warden. She explains that the essence of the Archdemon will be transferred

to the child. This situation spawns additional moral dilemmas for the PC: Can we trust Morrigan's intentions? Can we trust that the child will not become another Archdemon? Female Wardens have an additional dilemma. While a male Warden can choose to do the ritual with Morrigan himself, a female Warden faces the option of convincing Alistair to sleep with Morrigan, an option which is not only problematic because of the unknown consequences of the ritual, but which is also emotionally difficult to make if the Warden has been romancing Alistair.

In terms of narrative, Morrigan's offer has two functions. It gives Morrigan a pivotal role that positions her both as benefactor in this game and as potential antagonist in the sequel; and it works as *catharsis* by adding a second point of no return situation. In the first case, Morrigan appears as benefactor as well as potential antagonist by finally revealing her motive to join the Warden. She is the benefactor that suggests a solution to the mental distress the PC is in, at the same time as her offer suggests something more sinister. As Morrigan has demonstrated antisocial behaviour throughout the game, it is likely that the player does not trust her completely. She has also been telling the Grey Warden disturbing stories about how her witch mother has survived the centuries by possessing the bodies of her daughters through rituals not unlike this. Viewed in this light, the ritual may or may not imply the potential of the Archdemon to live on in a human body, thus suggesting that Morrigan may return as antagonist in the sequel to *DAO*. In the second case, the offer amplifies the climax by complicating the situation with a dilemma which may have unforeseeable consequences for the world. This is a point of no return situation that the Warden must go through one way or the other; either the PC must go through with the ritual, sacrifice somebody else, or commit suicide. This is essentially catharsis – "a deeply transformative spiritual event" (Ryan 2001b, p.296) that takes the players through the terror and pity of tragedy, before relieving them as the Archdemon dies and Ferelden is saved.

Companions are also in focus in *ME2*, but in a different way than in *DAO*. Like *DAO*, companions have both narrative and game play value. They are pivotal characters which carry the plot at the same time as they work as important resources in the game. However, while *DAO* is arguably the narrative of Alistair, *ME2* is a collection of micro-narratives (Jenkins 2004, p.125) about a selection of characters that happen to be connected through Commander Shepard. After some introductory missions, the plot centres on recruitment missions in which Shepard seeks out and convinces a number of characters to join the cause, followed by loyalty missions in which Shepard gains their trust and secures their well-being and stability. In this sense, each companion has two micro-narratives; one in which the player gathers second-hand information about the character, and a second where the player learns more about the companions through their own actions and stories.

Case 3: Developing Characters through Second-Hand Information

The most central narrative technique in *ME2* is to provide information about characters through gathering data about them. In order to seek out the future companions, Shepard gathers information through collecting clues and asking other characters about information. This is an example of what Jenkins calls an *embedded narrative*, where the game world appears as an information space in which the player

gathers information that is distributed around the game environment (2004, p.126-128). In *ME2*, this technique provides the designers with a high degree of control over the narrative process, at the same time as the player feels involved in the progression of the plot. After the introductory quests, Shepard is given a list of names and aliases by Cerberus' leader. The individuals listed are powerful persons who would be great assets to Shepard's mission, but there is not much data available except brief information about their whereabouts and reputation. In order to recruit the companions, it is not enough to go to their location and convince them; in most cases finding the recruits also poses a challenge. As the players move towards the location of the recruit, they will collect information from NPCs and the environment, as well as clues that provide an impression about what kind of person the companion is. During the recruitment missions, the player learns about companions through reputation and second-hand information, and not by interacting directly with them which by comparison is the most important source to companion knowledge in *DAO*.

The best example is perhaps the recruitment of the vigilante Archangel. The information on this character is limited to reputation and where to gather more information. Following the trail, an informant provides additional information that should pique the player's interest: Archangel is described as an almost mythical figure who has cracked down hard on crime syndicates in the area. Now he has become the common enemy of the syndicate leaders who have decided to join forces to kill Archangel. Following this trail further to get to Archangel's location, the player learns more and more about him by talking to different individuals, and experiences all the tactical planning and firepower that have been set up to take Archangel down.

Through distributing information little by little, and by presenting Archangel as a mythical figure as well as a tactical genius and by only providing a few, brief hints at his identity, the game makes sure that the player receives a lot of information about the companion. At the same time it engages the players' curiosity and presents Archangel as a deep and interesting character even before Shepard meets him. In this way the game puts the player in relation to the companions' actions and attitudes, thus building alignment between player and characters (Smith 1995, p.83). The information also has gameplay relevance, as it emphasises his usefulness as a resource to the team.

Case 4: Companions as Micro-narrative Protagonists

Loyalty quests work partly in the same way as the recruitment missions, but since the player already knows and has recruited the companion, the loyalty missions provide additional information about their attitudes, background and motivations. These missions are presented as issues that haunt the companions and that they should face before being fully able to focus on the task at hand. In addition to providing deeper knowledge about the characters, they are based upon emotional and ethical issues that the player must take care of. The loyalty quests are micro-narratives in which the companions take on the role of narrators themselves, either by telling Shepard about their past lives and present motivations or through their behaviour. Loyalty missions thus create additional depth to the characters by portraying them as emotionally complex individuals with a past that still affects them. These missions are also gameplay relevant, since gaining the companions' loyalty gives them unique

abilities, and also because they force the player to use that companion during the mission, thus learning how they work in battle.

An illustrative example is the scientist Mordin Solus who faces an ethical professional dilemma. During the loyalty mission, he is faced with the effects of his past biological research to reduce the fertility of an aggressive alien race. Mordin, who started out with a pragmatic view on the research as a necessary process, now starts contemplating its consequences. The player will have to either support Mordin's earlier project or confront him with the ethical issues related to the research. Eventually Mordin faces a former assistant working to undo the research and in the climax of the mission, Shepard must either accept his companion's urge to kill his assistant, or convince him that ending the project is right, thereby also sparing the assistant's life.

In addition to creating depth to Mordin Solus and providing an ethical dilemma to the game, the loyalty mission is a micro-narrative that works as a narrative on its own terms, even though it is also connected to the overall plot as well as being a foreshadowing of a similar ethical choice that Shepard needs to take later in the game. In loyalty missions, then, companions grow and develop, but although they are the force behind the narrative, the exact outcome is dependent upon the player who takes the role as ethical advisor and supporter. Therefore, in the *ME2* loyalty missions, the role of companions is not very much unlike Alistair's role in *DAO.* The loyalty missions are also where the players get under the skin of the companions, and where they learn that a character they did not previously feel moral allegiance (Smith 1995, p.188) with may grow into a deeper character, or vice versa. In this sense, the game is able to grasp ethical and emotional dilemmas from an evaluative and empathic point of departure.

These examples show how companions are closely related to the narrative setup of *ME2*, but I have only briefly mentioned how loyalty and depth of characters also are intertwined with game play. The most important event in which the companions and their loyalty matters is the *Suicide Mission*, the end game mission where the players will use all the resources they have gathered in the conquering of the enemy base ship. Throughout the game, the player has been told both by Cerberus' leader and the companions how important it is to be prepared for this mission, and it has been suggested that failing to upgrade your ship to the maximum and gain the companions' loyalties will have negative consequences in the end game. Companions may die in this part; anybody can die and there is also the possibility to lose the whole team, including Shepard. During the mission, the player will assign different tasks to different companions, and each companion's loyalty in addition to the player's understanding of each companion's abilities decides whether they will make it or not (Mass Effect Wiki 2010). In this sense, the players must use the knowledge that they have collected about the companions in order to understand their optimal role in the game mechanic for this mission. The *Suicide Mission* is also a highly emotional part of the game. Shepard and the companions understand that it is unlikely that they will return from the mission; this should also be seen in conjunction with the fact that the player has spent the majority of the game getting to know the companions and thus develop a bond with them. Knowing that many of them may die adds to the gravity of the mission, and for that reason choosing the right companion for the right task provides a high degree of importance.

Removing Narrative Power from the Player: Concluding Remarks

In this paper I have analysed Bioware's *Dragon Age: Origins* and *Mass Effect 2* with a focus on how characters work as narrative tools. I have argued that both player characters and other characters carry narrative progression, but companions are the most important devices for creating a richer narrative experience. While the player characters in both games are important for the growth and development of companions by working as advisors in personal and moral dilemmas, companions are scripted with particular potentials for development which the player may or may not activate. In this sense, the game designers have effectively removed narrative control from the player without making the player feel powerless in the progression of events, and enabled narrative progression through using companions as distributors of narrative information.

However, the two games utilize companions as narrative devices in different ways. *DAO* focuses on two companions with a particular role in the progression of the plot, while *ME2* focuses on having each companion being the centre of micro-narratives that establish them as deep and interesting characters. Compared to traditional narratives, *DAO* has more similarities to epic hero adventures while *ME2* is reminiscent of a selection of short stories set in the same fictional universe. At the same time, however, the difference between these games and traditional narratives are also pronounced: they are meant to be played and experienced by players, and even the narrative elements in the games are meant to be manipulated and played like mini-games in the greater game system.

The approach to player characters in these games is an important reason why this merging between game and narrative is possible. As role-playing games in which progression is based on the choices made by using dialogue trees, the players must evaluate the options from their own point of departure, or alternatively see the player character as a defined individual with its own motivations and evaluate the options from that point of departure. I have argued that *DAO* uses the former approach and *ME2* the latter approach. The effect is that *DAO* presents the PC almost as a blank canvas available for the player to take on. The game utilizes the bleed effect between player and PC to a greater degree, thus making what happens to the PC also personally relevant for the player. *ME2,* on the other hand, lets the player take the role of a defined character. However, since the player is allowed to choose the PC's attitudes through the dialogue tree, the players still have the possibility to add their own interpretations of Shepard into that character. In this sense, the bleed effect is still operable in *ME2*, although arguably to a weaker extent than in *DAO*. The narrative effect is thus that *DAO* may feel more personally and emotionally intriguing, while *ME2* positions the player in a position that allows for a more contemplative evaluation.

So can we say that one of the approaches works better? It is hard to give an absolute answer to this question, as it depends on each individual player's play-through what they encounter. *DAO*'s choice to remove the player from the protagonist seat is ambitious, but in effect the strategy may fail since there are many players that may choose not to support Alistair in his growth and development. For a player supporting Alistair and fulfilling his potential, however, the strategy works well. *ME2*, on the other hand, goes for a safer narrative strategy based on micro-narratives. The effect is a

seamless and cinematic game where each companion's development feels natural to the narrative progression.

Providing supporting characters with motivations and agendas that may carry the narrative progression opens for a coherent narrative experience. This does not mean that there is no player agency, or that the game's narrative may progress on its own without the presence of the player. Instead my argument is that in these games, the specific narrative progression with an exposition, climax, and resolution, is tied to support characters through their actions as well as their reactions to player activities. In this setup, the player character is important, but not the focal point of the progression of events in the game. Through the careful scripting of the actions of supporting characters, the game designers are also able to monitor and manage player actions since the player will have to acknowledge their actions and act in accordance with them. However, although this provides a strong argument in favour of games as a potentially powerful narrative media, I am not suggesting that all games are thus or that all games should strive to incorporate narratives into their gameplay in the way that these games do. Bioware's role-playing games have always been known for their narrative ambitions and focus on characters, and represent a genre that, maybe more than other genres, welcomes narrative-heavy gameplay. The argument made in this paper is therefore not necessarily applicable to all computer games, but illustrates an interesting and important approach to how game and narrative can be fruitfully combined. Developers that aspire to add interesting narrative content to their games may however use this approach to do so in a simple, but elegant manner.

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