Chapter 88

Friends and Rivals:
Loyalty, Ethics, and Leadership in BioWare's "Dragon Age II"

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores how through both narrative and gameplay mechanics, BioWare's 2011 digital role-playing game Dragon Age II seeks to help players redefine their understanding of ethics in terms of human emotion and interaction. These interaction-based ethics are the product of our desire to situate ourselves within a social community rather than on an abstract continuum of universal "right" and "wrong." The ambiguity contained within the friendship-rivalry system factionalizes Hawke and his/her companions, forcing the player, as the group's leader, to ally with one of the two sides in the game's overarching conflict. This coercive mechanic produces awareness in the player of the way in which interpersonal relationships form our responses in ethical situations, and causes the player to question whether their decisions are the product of "pure" ethics, or the consequence of deliberate or unconscious submission to the ethical mores of others.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional forms of gaming and play have long served to unite communities, as Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) has noted, by "liberat[ing] them from the usual laws and conventions" in order to unite them across conventional social and hierarchical borders through the space of the carnivalesque (p. 235). Gamespace – the physical and psychological realm of play – has always been an alternate, "virtual" reality constructed by the temporary liberations and limitations of gameplay. Games, McKenzie

Wark (2007) explains, "are not representations of this world. They are more like allegories of a world made over as gamespace. They encode the abstract principles upon which decisions about realness of this or that world are now decided" (para. 020).[1] As allegorical space, gamespace "is at once manifestly 'there', some *place* where performances can be *seen*, and then again diaphanously 'here', an imaginative *space* suffused with the potential of the virtual, where some other/Other *scene* might appear" (Bealer, 2012, p. 31). Within these "virtual" spaces, players are able

to (re)negotiate their identities in relative terms, positioning themselves as allies or antagonists within the game.

Modern digital games create electronically generated virtual spaces into which players are thrust as active creative agents complicit in both play and the creation of a unique, player-controlled narrative experience. Such games, suggests Mary Flanagan (2009), "not only provide outlets for entertainment but also function as means for creative expression, as instruments for conceptual thinking, or as tools to help examine or work through social issues" (p. 1). As virtual simulations, videogames are often criticized, Ian Bogost (2008) notes, as being inaccurate or unrealistic, and therefore unable to transmit didactic or reflective content; in short, videogames are dismissed as nothing more than "low-reflection, high-gloss entertainment" (p. 117). As simulations, they are often rejected as being unable to translate meaning from virtual to real space: "Simulation denial acknowledges that sims are subjective, and concludes that they are therefore useless, untrustworthy, or even dangerous tools" (Bogost, 2008, p. 107). However, videogames have the capacity not only for self-reflection, but for the production of simulated communities designed to direct the player's self-examination toward their potential as an ethical social subject (Sicart, 2009, p. 5).

I argue that the narrative and gameplay of many single-player campaign games – and here I will specifically examine digital role playing games (DRPGs) – participate in the construction of a virtual social gamespace despite being ostensibly solitary play-experiences.[2] Single-player DRPGs, although only played by one player at a time, are populous gamespaces: a DRPG's "gamescape…is a social space, marked by the spatial practices of both playable and non-playable characters whose comings and goings are lived and mapped within it" (Bealer, 2012, p. 41). Because the gamespaces of DRPGs are populated by these non-player characters (NPCs), the player-character – as avatar for the player – must interact with them in order to

accomplish gameplay tasks. Therefore, despite the solitary mode of play, many DRPGs nevertheless attempt to simulate community dynamics through the inclusion of NPCs who function throughout the campaign as the player's digital community.

In BioWare's 2011 *Dragon Age II*, we find a particularly interesting experiment in virtual social dynamics that encourages the player to consider the complex interplay of ethics and leadership within community. In the process of playing *Dragon Age II*, the player constructs relationships between Hawke – the player-character – and a set of non-player "companion" characters (NPCCs) as a necessary part of gameplay. This process of determining the player-character's persona through relational interactivity is a unique component of BioWare's NPCC mechanics. BioWare's use of player-NPCC relationships as a core component of *Dragon Age II*'s ludic construction encourages cooperative play, self-evaluation, and ethical reflection in the comparative safety of a single-player environment (Crawford, 1982, p. 12). The social, ethical, and leadership challenges in *Dragon Age II* rely specifically on the conflict between the ideological paradigms of the NPCCs and the player-character, Hawke.

In *Dragon Age II*, Hawke is not only responsible for choosing which NPCCs will accompany him on each specific quest, but which will even be included in the general "party," or group of potential companions.[3] Each of these NPCCs, like "real people," has a particular ethos that governs his or her actions and attitude throughout the game. What makes these NPCCs particularly interesting to a study of virtual community is that each evaluates Hawke's actions and dialogue choices on individual evaluative continua that range from "friend" to "rival." This friendship-rivalry mechanic is unique to BioWare's *Dragon Age* series (*Dragon Age: Origins* [2009], *Dragon Age: Awakening* [2010], and *Dragon Age II*, as of 2013). The mechanic's significance to this volume is that its presence indicates BioWare's interest in community interaction over individualistic behavior or beliefs.

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