

# **Ethical Advocates in Dragon Age: Origins**

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## **Introduction**

*Dragon Age: Origins* is a single-player fantasy role-playing game developed by BioWare and released in 2009. *Dragon Age*, or DAO for short, is often noted as a videogame that incorporates ethical dilemmas, asking its players to make “tough choices” at certain points in the game. Less often considered are the variety of ethical frameworks represented by the protagonist’s companions – allied characters that accompany the player’s character throughout the game. An analysis of the conversations that occur between characters during gameplay suggests that each companion (with the possible exception of the dog) primarily upholds one of three strategies within normative ethics, including virtue ethics, deontology, and consequentialism (Fieser). These companions and their diverse perspectives appear to produce a multiplicity of voices, and their influence on the player’s conception of his or her character evokes Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1973) concept of the dialogical self. While previous treatments of ethics in videogames have tended to focus on the development and activity of players and their communities (Sicart 2009; Consalvo 2007), or on the design of ethical dilemmas (Schreiber et al. 2009; Zagal 2009), Bakhtin’s theories draw attention to the important role of in-game dialogue and the player’s dynamic relations with the other.

To begin, I will refer to Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1973) description of the polyphonic novel, which is characterized by “the plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses” (4). Tied to this is his conception of dialogue, which incorporates spoken conversation as well as internal dialogue, and can be understood most broadly as the setting up of relations between the self and the other. While I do not wish to obscure the differences between videogames and the literary genre of the novel, Michael Holquist (1990) suggests that as a central idea in what he calls the philosophy of dialogism, novelness describes “a form of knowledge that can most powerfully put different orders of experience – each of whose language claims authority on the basis of its ability to exclude others – into dialogue with each other” (87). Bakhtin (1973) positions the polyphonic novel as a powerful instance of novelness. He also argues that “dialogical relationships constitute a much more far-reaching phenomenon than merely the relationships between speeches in a literary composition; they are an almost universal phenomenon which permeates all of human speech and all relationships and manifestations of human life” (Bakhtin 1973: 34). As Holquist (1990) has noted, Bakhtin’s works are dominated by a dialogic conception of language, and aside from having had an impact on literary theory, they are also “implicated in the history of modern thinking about thinking” (15). Bakhtin’s fundamental argument, according to Holquist, is that the self must always exist in relation to the other, and in my own research I have found his conceptualization of selfhood to be helpful in exploring the complex relationship between the player, the player character, and the companions in DAO.

The materials on which my analysis is based include notes, screenshots, and videos taken during two full playthroughs of *Dragon Age: Origins*, as well as online game guides, forums, and player-produced videos. In order to limit the scope of the project I have not included any of the downloadable content or expansions. Although my primary focus will be the ethical perspectives of the companions in DAO and the associated approval rating system, I will also explore how these elements might relate to dialogism and the development of the player character as character.

## **The Approval Rating System**

Before we can really begin to tackle the connection between dialogism and DAO's morality system, we must first understand it as a system. DAO incorporates many conventional features of computer role-playing games, including a customizable player character, a complex fantasy setting and combat system, and a party of companions. Companions are game characters who accompany the player's character as members of a party. Although they can be controlled during combat and exploration, they have their own personalities and will often voice their opinions during dialogue sequences. Sometimes these opinions are tied to approval ratings – numbers that represent the extent to which the companion approves or disapproves of a decision. As Jamey Stevenson (2011) points out, different forms of approval ratings are often used in systemic ethical games (games in which decisions are tied to quantifiable metrics and changes in statistics) as an alternative to a single-variable morality meter. In DAO, each of the nine companions (except the dog) has a separate approval rating, which can increase or decrease independently depending on which of the available dialogue options a player selects. This can occur when the player is conversing directly with that companion, as well as when they are in dialogue with others.

On a fictional level, increasing a companion's approval rating improves their relationship with the player's character, also known as the Warden, eventually leading to a close friendship or romance, while decreasing the approval rating can lead to animosity and eventually betrayal or abandonment. On a ludic level, increasing the approval rating unlocks new quests and abilities, allowing the player to access new game content and improving their capacity to defeat enemies in the game. Because each companion also has a unique set of abilities and items, losing a companion is equivalent to a loss of resources. It is strategically advantageous, therefore, to increase the approval rating of all companions, regardless of whether or not the player agrees with their differing and often contradictory ethical perspectives.

While approval ratings can be effective in adding weight to a decision, they may not be reliable markers of a player's ethical decision-making if players opt to "game the system." Game mechanics such as multiple save slots, the four-member party system, and gift-giving all provide ways of avoiding or mitigating negative approval ratings, and are particularly successful when combined with information from online sources. Multiple save slots allow players to repeatedly run through dialogue sequences until they achieve the most desirable outcome. If players wish to avoid the more time consuming trial and error method, online guides such as the *Dragon Age Wiki* can instruct players on which options to choose in advance. At times, the only way to keep everybody happy is to make sure that only those companions who will agree with the decision are present, and knowing who to bring along ahead of time can prevent a player from having to replay long sections of the game. DAO allows players to travel with a maximum of three companions in their party, and by carefully selecting who is in the party and when, players can

ensure that whatever decision they choose to make will be met with approval, or at least, will not be met with disapproval.

Although the ethical dilemmas presented to the player may seem important at the time, most of the characters who are directly affected by the Warden's decisions quickly fade into the background once that decision has been made. The companions on the other hand, will remain with the Warden until the end of the game, provided their approval ratings are high enough. The companions are also arguably the most fully developed characters in the game, with the possible exception of the Warden, and most resemble Bakhtin's (1973) notion of the hero as "ideologically authoritative and independent... a full-valued, full-fledged carrier of his [or her] own private world" (3).

## **Character Types**

Before we begin to form an impression of a game full of Bakhtinian heroes, however, I should note that not all voices in DAO are equal or "full-valued." In terms of character development and potential degrees or forms of interaction, some character types clearly dominate over others. The four major types I have encountered include: named non-player characters or NPCs, generic NPCs, player characters, and companions.

Named NPCs generally serve as quest-givers, informers, and enemy bosses. Interacting with these characters often initiates cut scenes or dialogue sequences, and some, such as Arl Eamon, play an essential role in the game's narrative arc. Generic NPCs, on the other hand, are identified with blanket titles such as Elf Woman, Bandit, or Genlock, and each individual is essentially identical to the other members of its group. Of this last group, the darkspawn are perhaps the most important. The darkspawn are introduced as grotesque monsters that kill indiscriminately and corrupt anything they encounter with something known as the taint. The player is informed early in the game that their primary objective is to end the invasion of darkspawn, otherwise known as the Blight. Frequently referred to as evil, soulless creatures by other characters, the darkspawn are rendered as voiceless objects, and are thus subject to what Bakhtin (1973) refers to as "finalizing secondhand definitions" (48). In DAO, there are no opportunities for interacting with darkspawn, except as finalized, externalized objects that exist only to be killed. Making peace with the darkspawn is not an option, and the player is thus forced in some ways to operate within an overly simplistic, binary opposition.

## **Co-authoring the Warden**

Although the player character is often seen as supporting the highest level of identification, Adrienne Shaw (2011) argues that the relationships players have with that character vary substantially depending on the game, the context, and the player. For one, he claims that there is a difference between a pre-defined character that the player controls, such as Lara Croft, and a player-created avatar, which implies self-representation. In DAO the player creates the Warden during a player creation stage at the beginning of the game. Though players can choose one of six origin stories, which determine their character's socioeconomic background and other contextual factors, the Warden does not have a preset personality. Aside from the occasional shout during a

fight, the Warden never speaks out loud, and during conversations, her back is usually turned to the camera.

Expressionless and voiceless, the Warden must be co-authored by the player in order to become a character, in addition to her capacity as an object or tool. By character I mean simply a fictional personality invested with distinctive attributes and qualities by an author or authors. Holquist's (1990) interpretation of Bakhtinian theory describes authorship not just as a process of creating an other, but also as the process of creating the self:

In order to see our selves, we must appropriate the vision of others...only [this] will let me be an object for my own perception. I see myself as I conceive others might see it...In other words, I author myself...the act of creating the self is not free: we must...create ourselves, for the self is not given (*dan*) to any one of us. This lack of choice extends to the materials available for creation, for they are always provided by the other (28-29).

This idea of creating the self from the outside has certain parallels, for me, with the process of creating the Warden as both self and other. Knowing that the Warden cannot act without my acting, I am tempted to refer to her actions as my actions, as something "I" did. She is the site of my agency in the game, but she is also foreign to me and physically separate, even as those boundaries become blurred (but not transcended) in the act of gaming. Given that the extent of my identification with the Warden is always partial and subject to change – she never simply "becomes" me, and I never become her, yet she is always incomplete as a character without my intervention – I would suggest that there is room here for input on the part of other characters. Just as my relationship with other people, images, and objects is integral to my understanding of my self, the Warden as self/other is produced in part through my/her interaction with others in the game world.

Although these companions can also be controlled during combat and exploration, and are thus a site of agency, they have a name, a personality, and most importantly, a voice that is not my voice, and these elements make their otherness more apparent. As others, they are also essential in the ongoing process of building the Warden's character. Every time the Warden interacts with these characters, relations of difference and sameness are produced, and when they describe their opinions of the Warden, they help to shape the player's conception of that character. When Wynne says, "You are a Grey Warden...It should inform your every action, your every decision," the player is made aware that this is, or should be, an important part of the Warden's identity, at least as it is perceived by others. Such statements, while often expressed as an objective fact (for example, "You are a woman."), are less passive observations than constructive events in which the companions and the player co-author the Warden. Ivana Marková (2003) states that, "co-authorship demands evaluation of the other, struggle with the other and judgement of the message of the other" (256). Formulated in this way, co-authorship implies tension and the clashing of ideas, as well as consensus.

### **The Companions and Their Ethical Perspectives**

Tension is certainly evident in the different ethical perspectives and conflicting personalities of the companions. For example, there is a strong contrast between Wynne's altruistic desire to help others and Morrigan's ethical egoism, which is reinforced by the differences in their appearance, voice, and general behaviour (Fieser 2003). Despite the fact that both are mages, or magic-users,

Wynne plays the role of the benevolent fairy godmother, while Morrigan is identified as a witch. While this produces a rather interesting value statement in regards to the relative morality of these two perspectives, these references to archetypal characters are misleading in their simplicity and two-dimensionality. Morrigan's stories about her childhood, for example, suggest that her cold practicality is at least partly a result of her unusual upbringing and isolation from the rest of society (Demiath 2011).

Each of the companions in fact has a similar story about how they have been made outsiders, and have come to see themselves as such; either because of their race, their lineage, their beliefs, or particular events. Sten, for example, is a Qunari - a fictional race unique to the Dragon Age world - and has a very different outlook from the other characters. The Warden finds him locked in a cage where he has been imprisoned and left to die after slaughtering a family of farmers. She later discovers that he submitted to this punishment voluntarily, an act which may prompt the player to agree with another character's admission that "the Qunari sense of honour is a bit hard to grasp." As a fatalist, however, Sten believes his concept of honour is entirely reasonable, while individualistic ideas such as self-determination are strange and irrational. As he says, "What I do is for my people, always...I have been trained to choose as they would." What makes Sten other is thus also an intrinsic part of how he determines right from wrong.

The major ethical perspectives that can be gleaned from the conversations between the companions and the Warden include virtue ethics, deontology, and consequentialism (Fieser 2003; Fieser 2000). Wynne and Morrigan are both consequentialists, basing their decisions on what they believe will benefit themselves or others, though Wynne also places a strong emphasis on duty, particularly when discussing the Warden's role in society. Another companion, Zevran, makes a number of comments that suggest hedonistic utilitarianism (a form of consequentialism), an approach which determines the morality of a decision based on the pleasure and pain it produces for everyone involved (Fieser 2003). Though he is not without regrets, he is able to embrace his lifestyle as an assassin in a way that Wynne, an ethical altruist, cannot understand. Her disagreement with Zevran's perspective is indicated in a series of dialogues, which begins with, "You must know that murder is wrong, I assume." Later on, Zevran explains his position, asking, "Were I to believe [that murder is wrong], what would I do with it? Feeling guilt about things one can no longer change seems to be very time-consuming with little hope for actual gain." As he points out to the Warden, "I was raised to take my pleasures where they could be found, for they do not come very often...people like you and I are not the product of happy lives of contentment." While Zevran is accounting for his own point of view, he is also providing the player with the opportunity to either confirm or deny his beliefs, including his evaluation of the Warden. In other words, he is providing an opportunity for co-authorship through dialogue.

Just as the opposition of the two mages in the group suggests the dichotomy of good versus evil, Zevran is easily compared to Leliana, another rogue who seems to abide by the principles of virtue ethics. In contrast to Zevran, Leliana is devoutly religious and focused on protecting the "good things in the Maker's world." She frequently compliments Wynne, who she believes is a "very good person" possessing numerous virtues such as grace and dignity. When speaking to Alistair however, she argues for the greater good, a principle that is usually associated with consequentialism (Fieser 2003). Her comments suggest that she is hesitating between what J.B. Schneewind calls "virtue-centered" and "act-centered" views (Fieser 2000: 152). While the first view sees personal character as morality's core and presupposes a virtuous being or agent, the

second emphasizes correct action and places value on what we do rather than who we are (Fieser 2000). Leliana admits to the Warden that she is afraid of the part of her that enjoys hunting down and killing people, and yet she maintains that fighting and killing is necessary in order to end the Blight. As these discrete acts of violence come closer and closer to becoming a long-term pattern of behaviour, however, Leliana is less and less capable of seeing herself as a good person. Her struggle to establish her own moral character hints at a key issue in agent-centered morality. As Robert B. Loudon describes it, “the difficulty is that we do not seem to be able to know with any degree of certainty who really is virtuous and who vicious” (Fieser 2000: 172). Although on the one hand Leliana is an advocate for improving one’s moral character, she also identifies weak points in her conception of morality, leaving her position open to dispute, both for others and her self.

While rogues, as thieves, assassins, and spies, seem to exist outside the law, warriors in DAO are more strictly bound by the rules of the society of which they are a part. Each of the warriors in the party generally abides by a code of honour, and most seem to hold a deontological or duty-based perspective on morality. Oghren is perhaps the primary exception, as he seems to enjoy killing and alcohol above all else. However some of his statements suggest that he has in fact lost what he values most. As he says, “I’m barely a dwarf anymore. My family is dead, my honor as a warrior long gone. I’ve lost my caste and my house and I have nothing else to lose” (honorablesadow 2010). Although Oghren may share some of the cultural values associated with dwarven society, he does not always agree with their rules. He complains that, “They train you to kill, teach you to harness your rage at the first noise you hear, then try to set a hundred sodding rules about it.”

Alistair seems to share this rather loose deontological perspective, and while he takes his duty as a Grey Warden seriously, his attachment to the Order is also based on personal connections to individual members – in particular a man named Duncan. This connection is important enough to him that he will refuse to stay with the party and forgo his duty to help end the Blight if the Warden chooses to spare the life of Teryn Loghain, who is responsible for Duncan’s death. While Loghain proves that he will go to any length to protect his country, Alistair believes his betrayal of the Grey Wardens is unforgivable, regardless of what his motives were. While the Warden must eventually side with one or the other, engaging in dialogue with Loghain and his supporters, as well as with Alistair, permits the player to see both sides of the argument, and raises numerous questions, including whether or not the ends justify the means. Answering this question is not simply a matter of choosing right from wrong, but of defining how and under what conditions each character distinguishes between the two.

While in many cases it is possible to group in-game choices into “good” and “evil” (Carsomyr80 2010), the companions foreground the multiplicity of ways in which those actions can be justified as right or wrong. While the range of perspectives may be limited (at least in this interpretation) to normative theories, the irreconcilable and often contradictory nature of some of the arguments that are put forth is, I believe, worth noting. Holquist (1990) points out that “Bakhtin insists on differences that cannot be overcome: separateness and simultaneity are basic conditions of existence” (20). With this in mind, it is perhaps worth comparing the simplified and homogenized worldview that guides the Warden’s quest to defeat the darkspawn horde, with the companions’ varied beliefs, which cannot be reduced to a common denominator. I should also note that while

classifying these beliefs based on ethical theories may be useful for drawing out the differences between companions, it is just as important to note internal inconsistencies and contradictions.

## Conclusion

While treating characters, both heroes *and* villains, as “free people” with individual consciousnesses is, I believe, one way in which videogames can develop as an art, game developers aren’t alone in creating the game experience. As Sicart (2009) has noted, the game as an ethical object can only be apprehended through the experience of play, which is always shaped in part by players. If players can also learn to perceive the co-existence and interaction of multiple worlds within a game, they may come to interpret a game differently, to demand or imagine different sorts of games, and to co-author their own characters in new ways. Certainly there is a great deal more to normative ethics and Bakhtin’s notions of polyphony and the dialogical self than what I have been able to address here, yet this paper will hopefully offer a new direction, if not a precisely laid out path, for the development, play, and interpretation of games. *Dragon Age: Origins*, I would hope, is only the beginning.

## Games

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