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Emotional Phases and Reactions in *Dragon Age 2*

Whether it is a Fantasy Science Fiction, Action or Sandbox role-playing game (or any combination thereof) there is always an emotional aspect at play. Aki Järvinen has identified several categories that exist in video games and cause distinct emotional reactions; Prospect Based, Fortunes of Others, Attribution, Attraction, and Well-Being. In this essay, I will apply his theory and attempt to discover how they affect players of the game *Dragon Age 2*. The players' agent is more than just a character. They are an extension of the player themselves. A game's level of immersion is often determined by how well a game can convey this idea. Playing *Dragon Age 2* was a very emotional experience that was really able to convey this well.

To briefly summarize the game and put it into context, *Dragon Age 2* is a video game with unique mechanics and an aggressive story. It is a fantasy role-playing game that has the agent take on one of the three basic archetypes that are natural to the genre; Mage, Warrior or Rogue. In game, being a Mage actually makes other characters and companions react differently to you. There is very involved lore and backstory to the game, but Mages are generally looked down upon by society and are forced into this kind of organization that is kept in check by the game's religious figures. This social structure is at the heart of all conflict in *Dragon Age 2*.

The game opens with the agent fleeing his or her home with her family from the darkspawn, a kind of demonic hoard that the first *Dragon Age* focused on. The agent manages to escape the darkspawn and finds itself stranded and impoverished in the new kingdom they flee

to, Kirkwall. There are three ‘Acts’ in the game which act as time markers, and takes place over the course of around ten years, which is indicated by the narrator. The story is actually told as a narrative from a companion character your agent meets later on, so there is foreshadowing to each section or ‘act’ as he narrates briefly before you re-enter your agent.

Järvinen defines emotions as being the “valenced reactions towards events, agents, or objects in the game” (Järvinen 86). It is these reactions that can help determine the level of immersion and embodiment the player has in the game. Anyone who has played a role-playing game has been faced at least once with having to make a tough decision without being able to know the outcome. Choosing to save one character now could cause another to die later, or choosing to pick up a shotgun instead of a sniper rifle could have grievous consequences without knowing if the next level will be close or long ranged combat.

Järvinen’s first category of emotional response, prospect-based emotions, deals with just this kind of dilemma. The player is faced with the problem he presents, “what does the occurrence, and subsequent resolution of the event, promise for the player, and is the event worthwhile in the sense that the player invests effort into trying to make the outcome desirable for oneself or for others” (Järvinen 90). I will never forget the shock I felt during my first playthrough of *Dragon Age 2* when my agent’s romantic interest, Anders blew up the game’s religious equivalent of a church, the Chantry. The first emotions felt were of just complete and total shock. It was completely unexpected. The event was happening to my agent, but I myself felt more than a little betrayed. My agent had allied herself with the Mages, but she had never tried to hurt innocent people as Anders had done. For a moment I actually thought he must have gone insane. The worst part was probably realizing how serious he really was. Then my agent was faced with a hard choice, to kill her romantic interest or to let him live and redeem himself at

the cost of two companion characters forever leaving the group. I and my agent had to decide what the best solution was for everyone involved, or just the agent herself. Ultimately, she made the choice to allow him to live and accepted the loss of two companions. I still felt betrayed, but killing a character I had grown so attached to was unacceptable.

Gregersen and Grodal comment in their article “Embodiment and Interface,” that “Although our physical embodiment ultimately determines the extent of our potential experiences, our experience of ourselves cannot be *reduced* to the actual, physical body... one need only consider the many instances where we literally feel the pain or joy of other people or represented avatar-agents as we observe them while linking aspects of our body image to that of the avatar” (66). I felt this very keenly throughout the entire game. The agents’ story was engrossing but large parts of what happened were left up to how the agent and I decided to act. The emotions I felt were caused by events that only occurred in the game space, but I physically felt upset. I felt embarrassed for my agent and myself in that we had been deceived so fantastically. It was incredibly hard to detach myself and decide what to do next. By letting Anders live, one could argue that I never really did. I made a decision that would seem irrational in the real world but the point is that it exists in the *game’s world*. The idea of killing Anders was so unacceptable that I couldn’t detach.

In a game so heavy with controversy and cruelty in its social structure, the fortunes of others are always close to the mind. These emotions include “good-will emotions... or... a display of ill-will in the form of resentment or gloating” (Järvinen 91). It seems necessary to explain a little about the controversy involving Mages in the game’s lore. There are three different kinds of Mages in the game, Circle Mages, Apostates, and Blood Mages. Circle Mages are ruled with an iron fist by the Chantry and their spiritual knights, the Templars. They live in

towers as a part of an organization that controls them, the Circle of Magi. Apostates are mages who hide from the Circle to escape their suppression, whether they run from the Circle or attempt to hide from it their whole lives. Templars are the ones who kill Blood Mages and mages who run away and recruit (or once again, kill) Apostates and children who show magical ability. Blood Mages are the mages who literally use their blood in dark magics and make deals with demons, both of which are unacceptable to just about everyone. Chaos and death always follows them, and they are extremely prone to possession by the demons they attempt to treat with.

One of the companion characters, a Dalish elf named Merrill, was convinced that demons were neutral and not evil, and not always wanting to find a way into the human world. My agent and I didn't agree with that at all, especially not after seeing all the disastrous things demons could and did try to do across all of our adventures. Her mentor constantly tried to dissuade Merrill from the path of blood magic, to no avail. Eventually, her mentor allowed a great and terrible demon to possess her in Merrill's place without Merrill's knowledge, and when she finds out she is horrified. The demon takes over her mentor's body and attempts to kill her clan and generally wreak havoc on the land. Merrill and my agent had no choice but to kill her mentor, much to her devastation. Despite the tragedy, I took a little satisfaction in her distress. She was naïve and selfish. Her mentor had tried countless times to explain that that blood magic was not only a double edged sword, but had a tendency to destroy everything and everyone it came in contact with. She annoyed me very much in that she was so naïve to the real world and sweet almost, but she constantly delved into such a dark place, claiming that it was the rest of the world who was wrong.

Rehak comments in his essay "Playing at Being: Psychoanalysis and the Avatar", "The video game avatar, presented as a human player's double, merges spectatorship and participation

in ways that fundamentally transform both activities” (Rehak 103). This idea is very important when considering the emotional responses that video game’s elicit. As exemplified by my reaction to Anders’s and Merrill’s actions in *Dragon Age 2*, I felt personally betrayed, not just upset for my character and her story. Rehak asserts, “Players actually exist with their avatars...” (Rehak 104). It wasn’t just my agent that disliked Merrill. I really hated her myself as well.

When the gamer is playing the game, they exist in the agents’ world as well as their own. The situation transforms itself into a place where the player *is* the agent who can feel as the agent does and has a great deal of control over what happens in the game. The player is no longer just a spectator to the game. Often times I found it was hard to make a decision for my agent, when I had no idea what the consequences later might be. It really felt like every decision could be vitally and fatally important.

These kinds of concepts and responses are vital to Attribution and Attraction. They affect how unchangeable events in the game affect the player, such as difficulty of challenges and possibly even plots that take the agent to a new state of being altogether. Attribution and Attraction are the reasons a gamer feels anything at all when playing a game. Attribution helps to immerse the gamer into the character. Järvinen explains, “Players may feel pride and appreciation towards themselves... but also reproach towards the actions of an opponent, or the rules which effectively represent the game as an agent” (91). It creates the bond between character and player and blurs the lines of their identities. When the player makes decisions for the agent, they are in effect becoming the agent. I felt proud of my agents’ actions, but hated Merrill and acted rudely towards her during the entire game. Attraction emotions are what attracts a player to a game, due to either its visual or mechanical appeal. *Dragon Age 2* is rich in color and character designs. The characters also have clear facial reactions that fit their

personalities. Anders often expresses his depressed demeanor with squinted eyebrows and a half smile. Isabella, a pirate, expresses sarcasm with raised eyebrows and a smirk. The characters feel like real people.



Isabella smirking (BioWare).

According to Järvinen, “Well-being emotions are emotions that relate to desirable or undesirable events” (92). He goes on to say how the unexpectedness of an event can have a great impact, positive or negative. By the end of *Dragon Age 2*, the agent has suffered the loss of basically his or her entire family. The game explains that the father died some time before the beginning of the game. The brother was killed by an Ogre at the beginning of the game, the sister was taken away by the Circle (though she still lives) and her mother was turned into a zombie. This last one was especially devastating. The plot line that leads to her mother’s death begins in the first act, and I must confess that in my second and third playthrough of the game, I explored all possibilities to try to save her. It was so traumatizing the first time that it was hard to watch it again. The event of her zombification came unexpectedly. However, thinking about it more, it made sense for a fantasy role-playing game to have an aspect of the undead. What *Dragon Age 2* did to make the experience so uniquely traumatizing was that it made it so medical. Your mother’s head was literally severed from her body and sewn on to a new Frankenstein-like body

that was made up of body parts of other women and resurrected. The reason also felt senseless in a plot that had you reclaim your name and wealth in order to honor the woman and ease some of her suffering in losing her son and daughter. She was lost to an insane blood mage trying to resurrect his wife. But it truly did have a purpose in that it forced my agent and I to rethink our stand on magic. Later on it is even revealed that the leader of the Circle had a hand in the research that led to your mother's death. Merrill's stubborn and naïve trust in blood magic is made all the worse after this event.

Thinking back on the plot of *Dragon Age 2*, I am unable to think of any events that were really “desirable.” There were small victories in helping people affected by the oppression of Templars or corrupted by blood magic, but they were always overshadowed by some terrible tragedy. The story also ended in a cliffhanger. But I do believe that there was some kind of balance in the game. Despite being so dark and depressing, I knew that I was at least making the choices I thought were most ethical. I was so immersed in the game that this aspect and the romantic aspect made the tragedies more acceptable and bearable. At least my agent was not alone, and she was fighting for something she believed in.



The crying slave statues that guard the port of Kirkwall, the agents' new home (BioWare).

Thinking back on my experiences and the implications of my strong emotional attachment seems to be a sense that while playing the game, some part of me actually believed what was happening to my agent was real. It is a strange dichotomy to find in a video game. Video games are, at their cores, Virtual. They are a representation of digital media and a perceived identity, not of something tangible. However, by having control over the actions and outcomes of the main character, the agent, the video game succeeded in eliciting a tangible reaction from my body. At times I felt pain, got choked up, was angered enough to yell. After finishing the story, the game followed me around for days. I couldn't get it out my head and I was still mulling over all that had happened. Perhaps a new category of emotional response could be 'The Illusion of Reality.' My strong reactions towards Anders betrayal and my grief over not being able to save my mother seem indicative of this. My strong feelings of dislike and disgust whenever I had to interact with Merrill are also strong implications towards an illusion of reality. At times I even yelled at the TV screen, as if the characters would hear me. Despite being virtual, I still felt the need to talk about the events and my feelings about the events that occurred in the game with my peers. Although it had the 'real' aspect and action of playing the game, such as moving the sticks on a controller, everything that occurred happened in the game space, not the real world in which the player exists in. Throughout the game, one could say I very clearly experienced an illusion of reality.

Dragon Age 2 was an intensely immersive game that really fleshed out Järvinen's theory well. It strongly elicited his emotional concepts of prospect based, the fortunes of others, Attribution, Attraction, and well-being. His theoretical lens really helped to look at all the emotions that I had already experienced while playing the game. It is clear that the developers took their time in creating a visually engaging and aesthetically pleasing video game, but also an

epic and complex story. Gregersen, Grodal, and Rehak's theories of the agent and embodiment were also well-proved in that there is clearly a strong physical bond between the player and the agent. They are able to exist simultaneously and in the same game space without taking away the immersiveness of the experience.

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