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                        HET236 Writing for Interactive Narrative
                              Assignment 1: Analytical Critique

*5) Perform a close analytical critique - not stating your opinion but developing a deep
reading through purposeful study – of a game's narrative and the way it is presented
through gameplay. You may want to make a rudimentary map of a small part of the game
to illustrate your analysis.*

Baldur's Gate is a RPG fantasy made by BioWare in 1998, based on AD&D 2nd edition
electronic game world. The game narrative follows the coming of age of a 20 year-old
orphan who is pitted into nature when an assassination attempt on his/her life fails thanks to
their mentor's sacrifice. Through the course of the player's journey, the game concentrates
on the player's moral choices as they affect major parts of the gameplay; the introduction
makes this clear: "He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not
become a monster... when you gaze long into the abyss the abyss also gazes into you..."
The accompanying manual that supports the game has an extensive background story of
'The Sword Coast', the realm in which the game is set, as well as a short biography of
famous characters the player may encounter on their journey. However, this has little to no
effect on the narrative within the game due to liberal interaction with NPCs (non-player
characters), giving enough story and background to understand the situation and make
moral judgments. Narrative is demonstrated through the game in the form of chapters,
dreams, NPC interactions and items.

The game is split into seven chapters, each consisting of a short readout with narration by
what appears to be a godly voice, someone the player should respect, or even the deep
strength of you subconscious: it is unclear who. Each of the chapters' readouts summarises
what has happened and what has to be done next. They are very vague, describing emotions
the character is feeling; this is abundantly clear in Chapter Two, when Gorion (the mentor)
is cut down and slaughtered in front of the character: the narrator informs the player that
they now feel overwhelmingly helpless and urges them to seek aid. This type of delivery
device is very suggestive and useful for getting the player to feel a certain way as they play
the game; also, it is important to keep the player on track to their main goal, especially
when the game has a wide variety of sub-quests. Chapters run on triggers, such as obtaining
a certain item or completing a quest; this portrays a very linear gameplay style. By having
linear gameplay, the designers then have the advantage of providing a strong narrative for
players, getting them to feel certain emotions and having them behave in a way that
corresponds to the story. As mentioned before, in Chapter Two when witnessing an epic
battle, the narrator laments, "Ambushed, you saw Gorion cut down before your eyes, and
even his powerful magic couldn't stop the onslaught", making the player feel insignificant
and forcing the player to focus on getting stronger and finding their place in 'The Sword
Coast'. Chapters are good in involving players in the story, giving them simply a direction,
so that they can go around freely finding out more on their own.

A level of moral judgment and behaviour is a major feature of *Baldur's Gate*, where there
are alternate ways to complete most quests. *Baldur's Gate* has a game dynamic called
'Reputation', which effects some dialogue and possibility of obtaining information/quests.
Reputation is a result of doing either good or bad: for instance, killing an innocent is a bad

thing and players suffer a large Reputation drop for it, which inevitably leads to reactions with NPCs being negative and may also affect the type of rewards one may receive for doing quests. This has a major impact on gameplay for the player, as it makes them think of how they would behave if they were placed in that situation. However, this also leads to some players taking advantage of the reward scheme in relation to their Reputation. For example, one might be playing a 'good' character, but in order to obtain a certain item he/she must commit a murder; some players will do it just to get the additional advantage for gameplay, which leads to the question of whether or not this narrative device is appropriate to get players to feel compassion for their character.

Throughout the journey of *Baldur's Gate*, during each chapter there are dreams, which introduce the player to a dark side of their own subconscious; this narrative device is a unique approach to introduce players to a hidden aspect of the game, a glimpse of what is to come. The dreams usually involve the character seeing scenes of torture or murder and sometimes a conflicting one with Gorion urging the player to continue with their quest. This makes players question what is going on within these dreams, leading them to feel helpless and confused, the same emotions the character is feeling; this helps the player relate to their character. This is an imperative technique that relates to the moral judgment of the player, where they decide to follow on with their deep evil desires or to bring good to 'The Sword Coast', the conflicts within which reflect the conflicts of in the character's mind. With the player making so many decisions with Reputation and moral choices, no two players will ever have the same experience of the game and therefore what they experience in the narrative is also going to be different; designers are then forced to make important aspects of the narrative non playable. This is clear with the chapter reviews and short cut-scenes that occur during gameplay, but take control away from the player.

During interaction with NPCs, text is the dominant device used for communication. The player is given a choice of options that present themselves during communication with NPCs. These options follow large dialogue trees, most of which lead to the same ending; however, there are some dialogue trees that eventuate to completely different endings, and even affect other dialogue trees. The story is mainly represented through this type of interaction, where the player learns about NPCs and can extract information from them so as to find out more about the story. With this freedom, the players that wish to learn more are able to, and those who simply want the important bits and to move on can choose to skip conversations. Given this ability to choose, the more important conversations in narrative need to be immutable, so players will not miss important information. Voice is also given over the text in conversations and cut-scenes to immerse players even further, providing each situation a specific tone. Tone has a large effect when it comes to communication with NPCs, as well as text: when Gorion is attacked; the 'Armored Figure' that attacks him has a very deep, angry, superior voice, which when heard leads the players to assume that he is evil and very powerful. Also, when talking to NPCs it is quickly established if the character is angry, happy, sarcastic, etc. Without the voice-over a strong narrative in *Baldur's Gate* may have not been possible, due to text being sometimes ambiguous in its meaning, lacking tone. Character emotion may have been lost due to this factor, and that is why it is essential to support the strong narrative for *Baldur's Gate*.

Items also help provide narrative to players. There are vast amounts of books to discover in the game that players can read through, despite many being very short, to give background to 'The Sword Coast'; they help bind all the different events within the world. Items all

have minor descriptions with them; magical items usually have a short background, especially those that used to belong to people in the game's history. For instance, the 'Cloak of the Wolf' has the description: "Cloak of the Wolf: 'Relair's Mistake' - A great amount of irony surrounds the creation of this magical cloak. Relair was a mage who overestimated the amount of control he had over magic, and in the course of creating this garment he apparently inflicted lycanthropy upon himself. The wearer can change form whenever he wishes. Relair was not so lucky." But more importantly, there are letters all over 'The Sword Coast' that give little snippets of story and help the player to establish what is going on. For example, when Gorion is murdered, the player can freely go back to his body to find a letter from a friend, urging Gorion and the player to go find help at a nearby inn. Also, there are many assassination attempts on the player, which when searching the bodies of the assassins they can read the bounty note, giving the player a genuine sense of accomplishment because they can see the bounty on their head grow larger and larger. Letters are not mandatory to successfully play *Baldur's Gate*, but they do help deliver an even greater narrative experience for the player, which works well with the other narrative devices to give the player a sense of world immersion.

Baldur's Gate has a very diverse game narrative implemented through chapter readouts, dreams, NPC interaction and items. World immersion is a large factor to the narrative, propagated through the manual's backstories, the in-game item descriptions and extensive NPC dialogue trees. Players should feel a sense of completeness with the amount of knowledge to acquire throughout gameplay. Chapter readouts and narration are essential to provide players with important summaries of the story and the main quest; it was designed so those players that choose to skip the interactive story can gain a summary so they do not lose track of their main objective. NPC interaction is the main narrative delivery device used in *Baldur's Gate* to great effect, mainly through text: players can develop their own personality and have a choice of options that tie in closely with the gameplay. Voice over the text also gives tone to what is being said by NPCs giving a deeper understanding of the dialogue. It's these factors that give a unique narrative experience to players who wish to partake in the immense world and story that is *Baldur's Gate*.

Bibliography

BioWare Corp, (1998) Baldur's <u>Gate: Game Manual including Volo's Guide to Baldur's Gate</u>, Black Isle Studios, California, USA.