

Dragon Age II
Official Podcast
Episode 2 Transcription

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VW: Welcome to BioWare's Dragon Age 2 Podcast. This is our second episode, with a focus on the art of Dragon Age 2. I'm Victor Wachter, Community Manager for the Dragon Age franchise, and today, Matt Goldman, Art Director for Dragon Age 2, is joining me.

MG: Hi Victor.

VW: How's it going, Matt?

MG: It's going really good, thank you.

VW: Cool. Thanks a lot for being part of this and helping to answer some questions and helping our community understand the art style a little bit better. We're focusing on the art direction in Dragon Age 2, which some of the fans have seen, and there are a lot of questions about what inspired the decision to go with a new art style?

MG: Well, the decision to make some changes to the art style really revolved around--well there were a lot of different factors, so I'll just go over some of them. One of them was that although Dragon Age is pretty decent-looking, it doesn't really have what we call an "ownable" style. If you put it up against many other products in the Fantasy genre, it doesn't really pop right off the page. You can't necessarily identify it easily unless you're familiar with the context itself. So that was one of the main driving forces.

Secondly, because I felt that the tone of the art didn't really convey what the message and the premise of Dragon Age is. So there, speaking with Dave Gaider and Mike Laidlaw, the premise of Dragon Age and what makes it very interesting and gives it its mature feel is that people are flawed. So in the game, you have things like war, demonic possession, demons coming from the Fade, the Blight itself, and the landscape becoming stricken and desert-ified. Those are physical manifestations of moral decay, and that illustrates better that people are flawed, and in Dragon Age: Origins, a lot of the art was a little bit whimsical, so my smartass-y remark is that it's kind of "Death Dealer meets the Hobbit." And some parts are very disturbing to look at, and other parts are a little, kind of, corny or whimsical. So we're trying to align the art, and the job of the art is to illustrate and create mood instantly. So those were the main two reasons that we decided to redress the art a little bit.

VW: Gotcha, gotcha. And what are some of the artistic influences, within games and also outside of games, that you drew upon when you were grafting the new art style?

MG: Well what we tried to do is find some primary reference, something a little bit unusual, that is outside of the regular pool of video game art. And so the first thing we did is we did a bit of an analysis, looking at different games that are our visual competitors, or competitors in our space--Fallout, Mass Effect even, World of Warcraft, Gears of War--and tried to figure out what is the intent of the art? What is the primary reference that they might be using? And also dissect that scientifically--as scientifically as you can--looking at the way they use light, the way they use palettes and whatnot.

So taking that into consideration, and the premise of Dragon Age that I discussed before, I started looking towards the history or the tradition of cautionary tales and the *vanitas* or the

memento mori. So the most famous, and I'm sure everybody will have seen this, is Pieter Breugel's *The Triumph of Death*, which shows a very surreal landscape that's being wracked by the convulsions of war. There are skeletons--the armies of the dead are pouring out of fissures in the ground and it's like a *danse macabre*. Everybody is susceptible to the power of death: washer women, clergymen, kings, peasants. So that and also some of the Kurosawa movies that people may or may not be familiar with--one of my favorites is *Throne of Blood*, which I like because it's a cautionary tale done in a Japanese kind of aesthetic using a western film medium and it's actually *Macbeth*, done with samurai. Fantastic-looking movie.

Basically taking that as a primary reference, then we could actually derive certain artistic principles that could make our game look unusual when compared to other products in our competitive branch.

VW: Nice, and how does that affect the characters? I understand we're doing more to differentiate classes in *Dragon Age 2*. Can you describe what that means and how that comes out of the influences for the new art style?

MG: Yeah, absolutely. Actually in *Dragon Age: Origins*, I think one of the main successes was the characters, particularly the character generation, the writing, and the vocalization of those characters were extremely strong. That was the strength of the game. Now one thing that's very difficult for art is designing lead female characters, so because of that problem I wanted to actually use that as an opportunity. As a fantasy game we actually have different races that exist in the game, so instead of trying to get bogged down in the technical details of making them all work off of one rig or something, use that as an opportunity to actually explore different sexual phenotypes that would be appealing to a wide range of people.

So humans, we're all familiar with what good-looking humans look like, in theory, but everybody's got their own preference. So elves are a lot more slender; they're like the running--my joke is that it's the magazine, so humans, that's men's fitness; elves, running magazines, they're lithe, they can go forever; Dwarves they don't read magazines, they don't really care, but they're tough, stout...they're the "strongest man in the world", they're the guy that can throw a beer keg over a house. Female Dwarves are cute, curvy little roller-derby girls, and so on and so forth like that. So that's the actual physicality of them.

Some of the principles derived from the reference that I was talking about is looking for a clear silhouette that is made more interesting through animation. So our visual design language--we're looking for something a little more aggressive, a little more purposeful, still sticking with the realistic surface response--metal looks like metal, leather looks like leather--and celebrating truth in materials. I guess I have a preference for brutalist architecture, maybe everybody specifically hates it, and I've always taught myself to love things people hate. It's kind of a contradictory part of my personality I guess. We're "celebrating the polygons," as we say. So the intent is to go for a much more lean, athletic, angular style--not low poly, or anything like that--but [those are] some of the influences that really made the characters look a little different from before.

VW: Right, gotcha. Gotcha. And when you put them in motion, what's the process like, working with the design to create the animation and effects for the new combat style that's also accompanying the game coming up?

MG: Working with the designers is definitely one of the most enjoyable parts of this job. It's challenging, in a good way, because you have to figure out the limitations of the technology and the intent of what the design is. How are they supposed to move, what is--you're illustrating some arcane process that obviously doesn't exist. So usually what'll happen is

we'll convene a mini-task force, we'll say--we don't call it a task force--but if we're making an interesting creature or a new combat style. And we talk about "what do we want it to do?" We look at some reference, what are some real-world analogues for that?

And then we basically start to piece together--to stick to combat, we'll do storyboards of what the combat's supposed to look like. Then the animators will film themselves doing different kinds of moves and we'll try to establish a feel for what dual-wielding will look like versus using a staff versus using a sword and shield. And from there, then we take it and we employ expert physical actors...people are probably familiar with the process of motion capture. We show them our storyboards, there's written descriptions, we've got videos, and they help us craft something that goes together. From there, we take that animation and then of course we have to make it work within the confines of our universe.

We can break physics a little bit--people can run faster, people can swing harder than they can in real life--and then from there we take those actions and then we go back to storyboarding and we start storyboarding the special effects, we get the sound guys involved, they imagine what it--you can convey a lot of emotion through sound--and then we put it together. We've got a huge team of dedicated QA guys who go through and playtest that, and they're tweaking the animations one frame this way and one frame that way to make sure it feels and works as smoothly as possible. So it is pretty collaborative, there's a lot of people involved. Once we've done one, we go ahead and do 13 or 80 more or whatever the designers have decided the game needs.

VW: Gotcha, nice. Nice. Something I've noticed--and the community as well--we've seen some of the creatures are looking different, not quite the same as their Dragon Age: Origins incarnations. What was the reasoning and how did you evolve existing creatures from the mythology into their new appearance?

MG: Well obviously the most striking example of that is the Darkspawn. The Darkspawn in Dragon Age...nice looking models, but when you take them as a lineup, they don't really look like they're suffering from the same mutagenic plague. So taking the opportunity, Mike's team is designing the story around this framed narrative concept, which is really cool, and so there's the concept of this unreliable narrator. Is he embellishing it? Is he telling the truth? We don't really know. But it kind of gives us a philosophical wedge to get in there and address some of those problems. Fundamentally, the Darkspawn do look very similar to what they did before, but we've kind of made them more cohesive, like they look like they come from the same army.

VW: I see, so--

MG: So that was the main reason.

VW: I see, so basically, installing some kind of genetic archetype to the race, if you will?

MG: Yeah, exactly.

VW: Okay, cool, cool. Since the community had some feedback on that, I'm just curious--obviously we've already released Dragon Age: Origins--how is community feedback from that game--has it influenced Dragon Age 2 at all? Are there lessons learned? Are there new directions in Dragon Age 2 that come out of feedback from Dragon Age: Origins?

MG: Well, of course. We all are looking at the forums and looking for good ideas there and one of the strengths of BioWare--and it's actually pretty amazing--the amount of investment and intensity that the fans have about our stories and about our worlds. So we're looking to

make something that can push the mold of what an RPG is, push the genre, take it to new heights of quality, still keep the fans who have been along with us for the ride for a long time and keep them invested, and also attract new people. It's a very difficult juggling act, as you can imagine, given the passion...

VW: Oh yeah.

MG: ...that our fans have. Some people have some pretty crazy ideas on the forums, and I would like to do some of the stuff...it's not actually physically possible sometimes. But what we're trying to do is make something that's--I think the strength of BioWare games is that they're fairly eclectic and you can make a lot of choices and that lets us accommodate a lot of different desires and fantasies. So that's what we're looking to do; that's our job. If we don't do that, then we're doing something wrong obviously.

VW: So we've seen Hawke in the screenshots, but we know that we've had character customization back in *Dragon Age: Origins*, and we know that we don't have to look like Hawke does in the pages of *GameInformer*. Can you tell me a little bit about how players will be able to customize their characters?

MG: Yeah, sure. Customization is one of the hallmarks of a BioWare game; that's pretty much what the game is about. So of course we have custom characters in there. In fact, even though the characters were very successful in *Dragon Age: Origins*, we actually went ahead and rebuilt the head morph system from scratch. The idea behind that was basically to increase fidelity of the faces, increase the range of faces, and improve the way lip sync works on the faces and the emotional impact and the acting of the characters. So we spent a lot of time making it possible for you to make any character that you want--any human character. So we built Hawke for a number of reasons: one, so that we would have one perfect case where the casual player could just click A and they would get a character that works well--not to say that the other characters aren't going to work well, but we're going to know everything about this guy.

One of the main impetuses, again, was about making an ownable art style, is that we need an ownable character. So it's very difficult to make key art or marketing materials when you could be any Grey Warden at all. So this makes it easier for us to put a public face on things. I think that Garret Hawke is a really cool design and I'm really hoping somebody is going to make this costume and come to Comic Con next year with it.

The other thing we did, and because we were redesigning all the characters anyway, is that we've changed the rigs--before, I mentioned that the rigs were basically shared across all the different races. So for Garret, he now has a custom human rig. Elves have a custom rig. Everybody's going to have a custom rig that really helps force the physicality and make those races distinct. I, myself, am a habitual dwarf player; I really think they're really cool, and you're going to see that they look really awesome in our game. That's a pretty flat ending, but that's really all I got to say: it's gonna be awesome.

VW: Nice, nice. So in *Dragon Age 2*, we leave Ferelden behind, and we go, for the first time, to the Free Marches. What was it like designing a new environment to adventure through?

MG: Well my background is environments, and think designing environments is really fun. I always loved doing this. I think the environment is a character in its own right, so designing any level or any kind of environment could follow a similar process of looking for interesting reference, talking with the writers, and trying to come up with a really compelling theme. And again, we have the general theme of the game, of this physical manifestation of moral decay, and all of these things work towards your exploring, in your own minds, this

interesting new landscape, this interesting city and culture.

I mentioned the city because the main area in the game, or the main adventure area, is the city of Kirkwall, and this is an ancient Tevinter slave induction facility. It's basically kind of an evil Ellis Island times a million. A gulag.

VW: Nice.

MG: It's no longer like that, but we were able to get some pretty stark imagery out of that source material. And I've always been fascinated by these monolithic churches in Ethiopia...very interesting. They're basically carved into the ground out of these huge, erratic stones that were left there. It's really interesting-looking. We're exploring those different themes, trying to come up with some fantasy analogues for industrialism and this slave mentality, the fortress mentality of this, the division between the rich and the poor, the powerful and the weak, and it's pretty unusual. I haven't really designed anything like this in any of the other titles I've worked for. The concept team has been really doing some amazing work on this stuff. So I can't wait for people to see it.

VW: Well cool, that's a lot of good information on the visual style we're going to be seeing. So Matt, I would like to thank you for joining me on this podcast. I hope to have you on again, as we get more and more art out in front of the eyes of the fans. And do you have any final thoughts?

MG: Yeah, sure thing Victor, I can't wait to do more podcasts. There's a lot more to see in Dragon Age 2 and I'm really looking forward to sharing it with all our fans.

VW: Outstanding. Thanks a lot Matt.

MG: Any time.