

# TALKING THINKING BELIEVING

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## **Dragon Age through words and deeds**

Eight a.m., and I have not slept. It is June, calm; the crickets' drone hasn't yet started. There are twelve missed calls on my phone and days of unanswered mail stacked up in a shoebox by my desk. I'm 48 hours into my second playthrough of *Dragon Age: Origins*, completely trashed on energy drinks, and feeling a calm I haven't felt in months. I am playing a human rogue Grey Warden named Azerael, after Az'rael, the Islamic Angel of Death. I'd given her the darkest, most weathered skin I could, an uneven haircut with bangs, and Afghan-green eyes. She's a hipster Pocahontas, and a visual anomaly in the world of Ferelden.

At the moment, she stands with her friends—the knight Alistair; Morrigan, daughter of the Witch of the Wilds; and my bard, Leliana. They and I, over the course of two years in-game battling the Blight, have spoken to hundreds of characters. Each conversation has subtly or radically changed the course of this journey to bring us here, finishing a final quest line before the game's ending throes.

Words, not battle, will also solve the dilemma at hand. I'm listening to the Lady of the Forest, a slinky spirit surrounded by a group of hulking werewolves. The beasts, she explains, were human settlers cursed by Zathrian, the Keeper of the Dalish Elves, for

the murder and rape of his daughter years before. We have decided against the option of killing the elves, and we've also decided not to help Zathrian slay these werewolves. He has retaliated, but we've brought him to his knees. Bald and weak, Zathrian asks the Lady if she does not fear her own death, as lifting the curse will end her life. She says,

*You are my maker, Zathrian. You gave me form and consciousness where none existed. I have known pain and love, hope and fear, all the joy that is life. Yet of all things, I desire nothing more than an end. I beg you, maker, put an end to me. We beg you ... show mercy.*

The wolves, clearly suffering, hiss and bow their heads. Zathrian too bows his head and whispers,

*You shame me, spirit. I am ... an old man, alive long past his time.*

In a slow movement, he works his staff and lifts the curse. Light floods up from the Lady and she vanishes. Light floods from each of the wolves as they shed their tortured, knotted forms. I see my approval rating with each of my groupmates rise: Alistair, +2.





Morrigan, +2, and Leliana, +6. This is the first time in *Origins* that my party members have uniformly approved my action. I've done the right thing.

As the humans are released from their suffering and embrace one another, I catch a glimpse of myself in my computer screen. I'm crying; no, I'm weeping—my eyes bleary and red behind my glasses. I decide to go to sleep, too overwhelmed to continue playing.

Later that day, when I wake, I'm returning phone calls. I'm opening mail and writing back to emails that have been six months dormant. I'm calling people first, forestalling their inevitable “are you alive” missives. They're surprised to hear from me. No, I'm fine. I'm not alone, I tell them. I've been with my friends.

I can hear clear uncertainty in their voices. *Is she finally cracking?*

I am, without doubt, extremely confused. I'm exhausted. And I haven't been so happy in a very long time.

David Gaider is pleased to hear of my emotional rollercoaster—from uncertainty, to great happiness, to exhilaration—through my experience of his game. He's even more pleased to hear how close I felt to his characters: how frustrated, angered, and elated I was with them. Lead writer for *Dragon Age: Origins* and senior writer at BioWare, Gaider is affable, clear-spoken and, of course, wonderfully talkative. “Emotional engagement is a reward in and of itself,” he notes. “I personally never like to leave the player feeling that they know exactly where they stand. Even if someone is completely in favor of you, even if Alistair is completely in love with you, the player should feel like he's interacting with a real person. There are always degrees of uncertainty, even at that level of intimacy.”

In duplicating the uncertainty of real-life interactions, it was no wonder I was so unnerved and drained by that point in the game. I'd been talking with people, both friends and strangers, for two days straight.

Gaider constructed the larger plots in *Origins*, and almost a quarter of the game's dialogue (around 800 pages total). He notably wrote the central characters of Morrigan and Alistair, as well as Zevran

and Shale, and a number of the quests, including the one described above. His mid-sized writing team includes Ferret Baudoin, Sheryl Chee, and Mary Kirby, all of whom write within the context of what Gaider terms “BioWare style.” As with any great writer, Gaider is concerned with emotional moments and mature storytelling. He wants his players to care about his characters, and he wants us to feel for them: I'm drawn to the *Origins* story because I seek profound connections with my party more than any bonuses or achievements.

As for writing thousands of pages of rich, engaging dialogue often cited as some of the best writing in games today: “Well, it's hard,” Gaider says, chuckling. Dialogue trees can become incredibly unstable. There are countless conditionals, seemingly endless permutations. Gaider elaborates, “I've found that people who have been fans of tabletop gaming, [or] have been a gamemaster, have an easier time wrapping their head around the dialogue trees, just because they are used to accommodating a player. Whereas, someone who writes prose is more used to thinking, ‘I control the dialogue, the viewpoint, and the internal thought process.’ The way we break it down: Writing trees is a matter of copying the branches and allowing for reactivity, while still maintaining dialogue that fills up the higher parts of the story.”

He feels a game player's experience is analogous to that which she has watching a film: “There is a way, I think, for writing, game interactivity, and cinematics to get to a point where the player feels like they're in charge. They see the writing, then see the emotional reaction on the screen in a way that's believable, and fluid, and reactive.” Gaider emphasizes that even at this level of technical and logical intricacy, game writers “shouldn't presume the player has a particular motivation or that he will respond in a certain way. It's more important that the player feels agency.” Though a game “can't have the nuances of social interaction that you would in real life,” writers work overtime to try to mimic them in their characters' speech.

There's no end of talking in *Origins*.

*Jesus, I thought, 32 hours in. Everyone in this*

*game wants to talk.* Even the werewolves just want to talk. Swiftrunner, one of the head werewolves transmuted through Zathrian's curse, hulks a good two feet above me. He tells me he'll tear Zathrian's throat out if "he doesn't actually want to parley." *Parley, parley, parley*, he keeps repeating, carefully. "If his intention is in fact, to *parley*, he will be able to pass." Fine. I'll *get* Zathrian to *parley* with you. Damn.

Zathrian arrives and is recalcitrant. "See," Swiftrunner groans, "he doesn't actually want to talk." Zathrian replies, "No, I am here to talk, though I see little point in it." Though sounding a bit like a tearful lover ("We never really talk"), Swiftrunner is expressing the controlling impulse of *Origins*. Talking through a misunderstanding helps resolve conflict; listening with empathy helps us develop understanding. Moreover, though we receive constant hostility in *Origins*, we are never allowed to react without first signaling our intention to destroy. We choose a "You're about to get ganked" option, and then the fight starts.

More interesting is the complicated inner layer of banter I have with my party members. Mid-game, I became curious about Alistair, so I started to probe him for information about his past training as a templar, his painful upbringing. I notice his esteem of me increases as I do. My approval with each member is gauged by an approval meter, and is scaled by each character's peculiar tastes and moral leanings; the meter ranges from Crisis, at -100 points, to Love at +100. For any action, I can climb in one character's esteem while falling in another's.

I move within a complicated aural fabric of backstabbing, gossip, and shrewd observations that my party members share amongst themselves. I'm learning through their constant playful banter and their engaging wit. Gaider speaks clearly about banter's purpose: "You experience your conflict through the conflict of others. You'll have Alistair saying one thing, and Morrigan saying another thing, and their sudden conflict is your subject. So, there is the experience of the decision itself, and there is also the level at which you are experiencing everything through your followers. They are the people you spend the most time with. They are the people you are supposed to care about."

Adding Morrigan to my party for the first time, I could not anticipate how important her voice would be in my group, or the fact that she is the strongest-written character in *Origins*. She emerges slowly from some ruins with a drawn-out, "Well, well, what do have we here?" (She is, ostensibly, British.) Over the next few hours, with each sardonic rejoinder she dropped, my more earnest party members begin to pale in comparison. Their stories are all interesting, and I was developing friendships with each. None of them, though, had Morrigan's badass audacity, her verbal bite.

Her coldness might make her unlikable or grating to some. She's arrogant, cynical, and brutal in her practicality. She will embrace a threat to your party if it proves useful in her utilitarian view of the cosmos. She gripes at my sentimental choices as she would rather the party get on its way than listen to Dalish elf love tales.

I'm also, at first, strongly influenced by my party's overwhelming distrust of Morrigan. Alistair is repelled by her from the get-go. Zevran, who is himself quite repulsive, says to her, "One day you will realize that you have wasted your youth and beauty on bitterness and suspicion." Wynne tells Morrigan that when she dies, "You will realize that because you never had love for others, you never received love in return." These are harsh judgments, which I'm hearing as chatter continuously behind me as I quest.

Says Gaider, "From my perspective, your party followers are your cipher. They are the way you experience the rest of the gameplay. Most of the moral decisions you make in the game evolve from things and events that the player has a very limited interaction with. ... Thinking about saving [the world] is difficult to wrap your brain around, but thinking about saving one person is something you can understand. The same goes with the moral decisions in *Origins*."

These side conversations between other characters set up a subtle, indirect challenge within the party: Who am I going to side with? Who do I trust, and why? What evidence have I gathered about each? Rather than leave one member isolated, which feels dangerous, I feel compelled to befriend Morrigan.

"I love the fact that in the case of Morrigan, people

fall into such extremes,” Gaider muses. “They either hate her or they love her, and that is perfect.” I love and empathize with her. I find that elements of Morrigan’s personality—difficult, prickly, a loner—remind me of a large number of my friends. Contempt for weakness in men? A brash Will to Power? Low tolerance for sentimentality? Bring it on. Her naiveté is a product of living out her life in the Wilds with her mother, a witch. Humans puzzle her. She has to learn how to “look into another’s eyes, how to sit at a table, how to bargain without offending.” She knows little of the “civilized wilderness” of human interaction.

I consider her perspective. In doing so, I find I’m offered the possibility of friendship with a rare creature, a poetic dame. She describes shape-shifting, briefly takes me outside myself: “You look upon the world and you think you know it well. I have smelled it as a wolf, listened as a cat, prowled shadows that you never dreamed existed.” She is a logician with her own brand of wisdom, favoring unexplored possibilities of power. I started to ignore my party’s distrust of her and tripped over myself to please her. I hunt down her mother’s grimoire and empty my group’s coffers to buy her gifts.

Gaider notes that Morrigan’s background chatter is just one way we get to “know” her; her banter was specifically “designed to pick apart her feelings on faith and tease out her exact relationships with her party members. This really opens up for the player to listen. *We reward a player who does listen.* The player can get a feel for what kind of person she is, on top of what she is able to talk about. I imagine for a lot of players, their first response is, *I should be able to talk to her*”—that is, intimately, in a way no other player can.

Gaider suggests that *Origins* is rare for the non-romantic intimacies the player shares with multiple characters. I’m pleased to find that Morrigan becomes more responsive to me as her approval rises. She becomes curious about *my* opinion of her, and this feels fulfilling. She wants to know if I see her as a grotesque abomination. I tell her that her abilities sound quite useful. She smiles.

I learn in *Origins* through the ritual of conversation. Conversing well, even being social, are challenges and skills to master in-game. Experienced, effective communicators usually become powerful in groups.

By the last quests, my rogue is mentally fully resistant and capable of commanding any conversation. I can convince any character of anything, turning them, like a puppet master, from fury to passive discontent. Cunning and coercion are key skills I have leveled, which open up all sorts of dialogue options. I can help characters change their minds, or come to uneasy truces. As I progress, a (*Persuade*) or (*Intimidate*) appear before certain dialogue options, determined by my rank in Coercion.

I asked Gaider whether talking is an art to master here in the way combat is mastered, and whether *Origins*’ dialogue trees allow for a more tactical use of social skills. “Well, if we’re generating a kind of verisimilitude, that’s when the player sheds the feeling that this is a videogame and these are scripted responses that are just dropped,” he says. “If a player takes an action, he gets a reaction from the character, as long it’s consistent with that character. The player is learning exactly what kind of responses [that she gives] generate a specific reaction from that character.” Morrigan always reacts differently from Alistair, for one, and “the player has to learn to keep that straight. Alistair sometimes will pull away if you [joke] too far with him ... the conversation may suddenly push too close to home.”

*Origins* seems to encourage me to be manipulative; I do need to be smart about people. For one, there are clear benefits to being altruistic. The better I am, the more people I help, the higher my approval rises. Making “good” moral choices would seem to be an imperative.

Part of social maneuvering, I learned, also involves a tiny bit of lying. At one point, having killed a little boy who has become an Abomination, Alistair will charge me as not having done everything I could. The truth: I killed Connor because I couldn’t stand his cloying mother’s insistent pleas. She did not appreciate my greater concerns: killing Darkspawn and not losing time. So, I drop in Alistair’s esteem for killing a child, and lose the chance to sleep with him. His loss. However, by

persuading him that “I did the best I could,” I diffuse his anger and lose as little approval as possible.

As seamless as the illusion of the real can feel here, I’m perfectly aware of which responses will most anger Alistair. I am not going to tell him to “just deal,” partly because he might leave if he becomes too hostile. I work tactically within the narrative framework I have grown to care for, a key mark of RPG gameplay. I am learning how to game the system at the same time I’m learning about my new friends.

Though it may seem that gaming tactically would negate my care for my teammates, I would argue that my choices become more subtle and more human the more I get to know my party. If I’m blustering through seeking achievements alone, I stay in Alistair’s good graces for purely tactical reasons. However, because he felt like my friend, my impulse to avoid enraging him also feels like the right thing to do. Gaider emphasizes that these friendships are goals in themselves: “Building a relationship with [a] character is supposed to be its own reward ... The more the player feels that he has developed a real relationship, the more the decisions in the game have relevance,” and the more my successive choices feel intentional and weighted.

Of course (to be clear), I know I’m not interacting with real people in *Origins*. Why, though, does it feel like I am? There’s a careful illusion at work here thanks to Gaider and his team.

On a cognitive level, conversation is comprised of a number of steps of belief. For one, you have to believe the other person has a brain. You do this without thinking, trained from the beginning of awareness to believe that the people around you are endowed with consciousness. You’re talking to other human beings; you attribute thoughts to them, but this too is an act of interpretation, imagination, and conjecture. You’re then transformed by the aural and physical clues (evidence) you gather. This is the illusion the writing team works to create—this, to use a term from cognitive science, “quoted mind content.” You read a person’s behavior as representative of his inner feelings and thoughts. The cleaner this illusion is, the more I become sure that I know what a person is thinking and feeling.

I can’t tell if (just as in real life), I’m overanalyzing

and over-imagining my relationships here. I’m never sure if my desire to appease Morrigan is rooted in my imagination of her buried vulnerability, as she scoffs in public at personal weakness. My ambivalence over Morrigan, Gaider says, is fine. Like me, “some people felt like they cracked that surface, and only *they* could have cracked that surface and saw the sort of frightened girl that was underneath. I know it’s there, and so it’s just a matter of leaving that room so that when you’re interacting with her, you never quite know where you stand. If ... Morrigan gives a little smile, you have to leave some room in the player’s head to interpret what is behind that reaction.”

That “room” left for interpretation is where I form my knowledge of a character, or person. Eventually, we decide on what it is we “know” about a person’s personality and intentions. We misinterpret people’s intentions often, and go against the advice of friends in making judgments about people.

At some point, what I know becomes stable. I “know” Morrigan is not to be trusted, but I also “know” her as a good friend. I feel I’ve cut through Morrigan’s bluster by game’s end. I want her to stay in my group, which is why I allow her to undertake her final, dastardly act, one potentially lethal to Ferelden’s existence. I trust her when she promises she will not allow it to come to that. Either way, I’m forced to give my word that once she leaves, I’ll never seek her out. All I can think is, after all this, she’s just *leaving*? I am left wondering why she has betrayed our friendship, which she said she valued deeply. I struggle to conclude that she must, after all, have her reasons.

Once I’ve saved the kingdom, my return to court feels bitter and sad. Morrigan is absent from the celebrations. The rest of my party are gathered in fine clothing; they thank me for my sacrifices. I don’t want to talk. When told in a cut scene that Morrigan may have been seen traversing the Frostback Mountains, I recognize that I’m learning, through a cool postcard, that Morrigan will always choose the unsentimental path, even with me. She is just not bound to me the way I am to her. And yet, though I can’t speak to her, I trust that I will see her again. I believe and I know that she thinks of me. **KS**



SEE YA

WELL,  
BYE THEN