
Game Title: Guild Wars: Prophecies
Platform: PC
Genre: MMORPG
Release Date: April 28, 2005
Developer: Arena.net
Publisher: NCsoft
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: uncertain
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Overview

Guild Wars: Prophecies employs a quest and mission based system for disseminating story elements. The primary plot is told through missions and cut scenes, while quests impart greater detail into various facets of the story. This is an effective structure for the game, as it allows for more game play time, moves the main plot at a decent pace, and still allows players to explore more detail if they so desire.

The story itself is broken into three acts, with a prologue section for the tutorial. The prologue covers only part of a day. It gives an introduction to several characters that are featured heavily later, as well as allowing the player to get comfortable with the world. This area is incredibly well done, having many subtle elements that contribute greatly to its impact on players. The first act covers the events transpiring two years after the prologue, involving the human kingdom of Ascalon. This portion has the players follow the prince of Ascalon, and further bolsters the lore of the kingdom. It builds up a relationship with the prince, giving the player characters incentive to follow him when he chooses to leave the kingdom. The second act is the longest, starting with following the people of Ascalon as they leave their kingdom, and concluding with the player characters achieving an event called Ascension, enabling them to become much more powerful. This is also the act in which the goals of the player characters change from saving the people of Ascalon, to saving the human kingdom to which they fled. The third act sees the goal expand again to cover saving the entire world. An interesting element is the way that the game changes from act to act by increasing the maximum size of a player party by two each time, further signifying a new level of initiation.

Characters

1. **The Player Characters** – As an MMORPG, Guild Wars supports a vast amount of character customization. This covers appearance, sex, and name. Additionally, some players create their own stories for their characters. In the context of the game's plot, the player characters tend to follow various group leaders, starting with Prince Rurik and ending with Vizier Khilbron.
2. **Prince Rurik** – Prince Rurik is a symbol of the hope of Ascalon. He has his people and their safety as his focus, and as such is a savior to them. The players follow Rurik throughout the first act, and into the beginning of the second act. He leads them over the mountains, and heroically sacrifices himself for their safety, thus ensuring the survival of those who chose to follow him. This symbol of self sacrifice is a powerful one. It shows that Ascalon no longer needs hope;

their hopes have been fulfilled by the efforts of their prince. However, the story of Rurik does not end here. He has one final task to complete before he has earned his rest. The Lich Lord reanimates him and forces him to fight the player characters at the end of the game. They defeat him, allowing him to enter the rest he so richly deserves. Before passing away a second time, however, he is able to impart to the players the Lich Lord's weakness. This final act of service allows him to fully save his people.

3. **Vizier Khilbron** – Secretly the Lich Lord, Vizier Khilbron is a powerful sorcerer and necromancer. He aids the player characters according to the Flameseeker Prophecies, which foretells his ascension to power.
4. **Supporting Cast** – There are a number of important characters that show up throughout the story, but they do not bear a significant enough presence to require a full discussion. The most important of these are Markis, a member of the White Mantle who has infiltrated the Shining Blade and betrays them, Evennia, the leader of the Shining Blade who trusts in Vizier Khilbron to bring the Shining Blade victory over the White Mantle, King Adelbern, father of Prince Rurik, who cares more for his lands than for his people, and Glint, an ancient dragon and the prophetess who spoke the Flameseeker Prophecies.

Breakdown

Guild Wars: Prophecies has a number of powerful symbolic elements interwoven into the story, and there are a few major ones that stand out as especially well done. However, to understand these, it is important to have a basic overview of the plot.

Guild Wars: Prophecies does an excellent job of playing to traditional fantasy elements, while at the same time bringing its own ideas to the table. The story of the player characters begins in a human kingdom known as Ascalon. Ascalon is under attack by a bestial, cat-like race known as the Charr. The initial tutorial area occurs in what is referred to as Pre-Searing Ascalon. This name is derived from an event known as the Searing, in which the Charr invoke powerful magic that devastates Ascalon. This event, followed by the subsequent Charr invasion, prompts the prince of Ascalon, Rurik, to go against his father's wishes and lead his people over the mountains into another human kingdom known as Kryta. King Adelbern, Rurik's father, remembers the war that occurred between Kryta and Ascalon many years ago, leading him to be distrustful of the emissary that Kryta sent. The players follow Rurik into Kryta, though the prince meets his end in the mountains.

It is in Kryta that the Ascalonian refugees settle down, but the player characters continue on. Kryta is under assault by undead creatures. These creatures are led by a powerful lich. In an effort to protect their people, the player characters work with the current leaders of Kryta, a religious group known as the White Mantle that follow the will of unseen gods. As the players work with the White Mantle, they collect together a group of people referred to as the Chosen. These Chosen are supposedly sent off to train; however, a group of renegades, calling themselves the Shining Blade, show the player characters the truth. The Chosen are sacrificed atop a powerful stone, known as a blood stone.

This discovery causes the player characters to follow the Shining Blade in their efforts to stop the White Mantle and break their rule over Kryta. They join forces with a mysterious sorcerer named Vizier Khilbron, who agrees to work with them in exchange for a powerful staff that the White Mantle had obtained. Unfortunately, the White Mantle surround them, and they are forced to flee. Several key members of the Shining Blade are captured in the process. Vizier convinces the players to go to the Crystal Desert, the ruins of an ancient struggle for the favor of the gods. It is there that the player characters can Ascend and realize their full potential as Chosen. After completing the trials of the desert, the player characters can now see the unseen gods of the White Mantle, which are in reality a

race of powerful spell casters known as the Mursaat. With this new ability, the players combat the Mursaat, and conquer their stronghold.

It is here at the final stage of the Flameseeker Prophecies, an ancient collection of prophecies that have dictated the course of the entire plot, that Vizier Khilbron reveals himself to be the Lich Lord responsible for the undead invasion of Kryta. He has also reanimated Prince Rurik as a powerful ally. After giving their prince the rest he deserves, the player characters battle and destroy the Lich Lord.

This is a fairly straightforward and simple overview of the story to Guild Wars: Prophecies. It is necessary to be familiar with these events to enable a quicker understanding of more significant story events.

The first major thing to examine in greater detail is Pre-Searing Ascalon. There are many subtle things done here that make it one of the most emotionally impacting areas of any game. Everything, from the opening cut scene to the witnessing of the Searing, has an important role to play. One of the first, most obvious things, is the appearance of Ascalon. It is autumn. This indicates a kingdom in decline, reaching the golden years towards the end of its time. However, it is clearly early autumn; the opening cut scene mentions a warm morning breeze, and while many of the trees are colorful, there are also still some with green leaves. This indicates that the kingdom is only just beginning to enter its decline. It should have a long time yet with which to enjoy the golden years. This subtle symbolism makes the events of the Searing even more painful. While it is indicated that the time of Ascalon is coming towards an end, the Searing is also clearly too early. Another important thing is that a number of the enemies are fairly passive, and tend not to attack the player unless provoked. While this makes good sense from a game play perspective, it also lends Ascalon a sense of peace. This works to amplify the violence involved with the Searing. The final major element in Pre-Searing is Gwen. Gwen is a young girl that the player can give flowers to, along with other items. She will follow the player around, and provide random information about various other characters. She strongly symbolizes the innocence of the player, as well as that of the area as a whole. She is seen in the cut scene depicting the Searing, and disappears afterwards. This signifies that the real game has begun; the innocence is lost. Gwen had such an impact on players, that she actually has had her story fleshed out in much greater detail in later games.

The next major event to examine is the process of Ascension that the players have to go through. To Ascend, the player characters have to complete three trials. The trials can be completed in any order; they are the tests of focus, purity, and endurance. These tests are used to draw the attention of the gods to the players, opening the path for the final test. The final challenge is one of mythic proportions. The player must defeat his doppelganger. This symbolizes the ability to overcome oneself and become part of a greater whole; the shedding off of the old self and the embracing of one's destiny.

The final major narrative element to examine is the full circle that occurs with the completion of the game. At the start of the game, the player characters are terrorized by the Charr, who worship powerful titans as gods. These titans gave the Charr the power to perform the Searing; and burning effigies for these mighty beings lend the Charr strength. At the end of the game, the Lich Lord releases the titans upon the world. The player characters then must defeat these titans. In doing so, they have fully conquered the threat of Charr, as they have destroyed their gods. This shows just how powerful the player characters have become.

Strongest Element

The best narrative element of Guild Wars: Prophecies is the way that it expands the scope of the players' primary goal. It starts by causing the players to want to save and protect Ascalon, then both the people of Ascalon as well as the nation of Kryta, all the way to protecting the continent of Tyria itself.

While the story of heroes going to save the world is somewhat clichéd, *Guild Wars: Prophecies* smoothly transitions from a somewhat smaller goal, allowing the player characters to become stronger and more powerful. This allows a smooth transition that makes the story of great and mighty heroes saving the world much more believable. In other words, the players' don't start off trying to save the world, but rather defend their kingdom and their people. The actual goal of saving the entire world doesn't appear until much further on, and is not a goal until about two-thirds of the way through the game. This gives the ultimate quest of saving the planet a much more realistic and far less derived feel.

Unsuccessful Element

The worst narrative element of *Guild Wars: Prophecies* is Prince Rurik. While he is supposed to be a grand representation of the hope of the people of Ascalon, inspiring patriotism towards the kingdom and a desire to save its people, he instead comes off as annoying and many players have taken to mocking his dialogue. Another issue that exacerbates the entire issue is that if he dies in a mission, then the players instantly lose. Rurik is not known for being intelligent in how he engages enemies, and as a result, players can become exceedingly annoyed at losing missions because he carelessly charges into a group of enemies by himself, resulting in his death and a mission failure. These elements combine to make what should have been a great and powerful symbol an object of mocking and scorn.

Highlight

The part of the plot that most impacted me was *The Searing*. The transition is so dramatic. It ends the tutorial and the real game begins, and the difference between the two is astronomical. The tutorial is a much more peaceful area than the rest of the game. Nowhere else in all of the *Guild Wars* universe across all of the games has a feel quite like it. Watching it end is truly saddening.

Critical Reception

IGN reviewer Tom McNamara gave *Guild Wars: Prophecies* a score of 9/10 and Gamespot reviewer Greg Kasavin gave it a score of 9.2/10. The reviews said good things about the overall experience of the game. The IGN review went into a bit more detail on the plot, saying, “As a whole, in fact, *GW* missions are based around telling the story of the world around you, rather than telling you to kill a guy, gather a certain number of items and bring them back, or take this item to some other guy who's apparently too shiftless to get it himself.”

Lessons

Guild Wars: Prophecies has a number of important lessons about narrative architecture, and ways to build stories that have a lasting impact on players.

1. Careful attention to detail about all aspects, not just dialogue, can greatly enhance the impact of a story. The best example of this in *Guild Wars: Prophecies* is *Pre-Searing Ascalon*. There are so many subtle things done with it that create strong emotions in players. There are a number of players that create characters whose sole purpose is to stay in this area. For me, personally, I always think of *Pre-Searing Ascalon* during the autumn thanks to the power and impact of this section of the game.

2. Be mindful of how the story is told. While Rurik is a great hero from the standpoint of the plot, he unfortunately has the tendency to irritate players. He is a bigger than life character, and much of his dialogue is more grandiose than it should be. He often says things that if written a bit differently would strengthen his character instead of cause players to mock him.
3. The mythic concept of expanding consciousness is a very useful tool for building up the plot. The way that Guild Wars: Prophecies starts small and realistic with the player goals, and expands the overall scope of the goals in a logical way instead of jumping right in with “save the world” is very effective at drawing the player in. More games should use this sort of approach, as it creates more realistic feeling plots.
4. Be careful of how game play and design decisions impact the telling of a story. While the mission and quest system that Guild Wars: Prophecies uses is a great way for its plot to be conveyed, there are a lot of design decisions that have a significant impact on the enjoyment of the story. Sadly, many players choose to skip a fairly large section of the plot as the missions can be long and sometimes rather tedious. A fair number of quests are also skipped, as many of them are too out of the way and not rewarding enough.

Summation

Guild Wars: Prophecies is deserving of analysis because it has a superb plot that utilizes mythic concepts and symbolism effectively to tell a compelling story. By slowly expanding the scope of the players' goals, the story is more engaging and feels more involved and not as clichéd. Also, by effectively utilizing powerful symbols, the story and world come alive to the player, infecting their psyche with a connection to the world of Guild Wars that they would never have otherwise.