

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Beyond: Two Souls
Platform: Playstation 3
Genre: Drama, action-adventure
Release Date: October 8th 2013
Developer: Quantic Dream
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: David Cage

Overview

From the creators of the award-winning video game *Heavy Rain* comes *Beyond: Two Souls*, an emotionally powerful narrative experience. Academy Award nominated actress Ellen Page stars as the troubled Jodie Holmes and Willem Dafoe as Nathan Dawkins. The game revolves around the idea of what lies beyond death. It tells the story of Jodie Holmes, a young woman born with an entity connected to her named Aiden. He possesses remarkable paranormal powers that aid Jodie throughout her tough life. After many dangerous incidents with her foster parents, Jodie is brought to the DPA (United States Department of Paranormal Activity) under the care of scientific researchers, Nathan Dawkins and Cole Freeman, to conduct their research on entities and the death plane called the Infraworld.

Characters

- **Jodie Holmes** – Jodie has a remarkable gift. She has an entity named Aiden linked to her since birth. The game focuses on Jodie from the ages of seven to twenty-five years old. When she was young, she was quiet and always scared because of her lack of understanding of who, or what, Aiden is. She is then seen as a strong individual when she gets older, going through multiple stages in her life such as targeting a warlord in Somalia, running away from the CIA for treason, and becoming homeless. Jodie is one of the characters the player controls.

Although Jodie and Aiden are linked together, these two are considered to be two different souls with different characteristic traits.

- **Aiden** – He is a mysterious entity linked to Jodie since birth. He has the power to communicate, protect and help Jodie with telekinesis, clairvoyance, possession, healing, shielding, and mediumship. Aiden’s physical appearance as an entity is never truly shown; he is instead seen in a first-person perspective whenever the player interacts as him. Along with no physical appearance, he does not talk since he does not have a voice. There is also a blue coloured cord that connects him to Jodie that is not visible to other characters. Whenever Jodie is being attacked by evil entities, he destroys them with his power. He is considered a dangerous mystery as he is being held at the DPA with Jodie for their experiments. He seems rather annoying at times as he conveys a mind of his own, making him sometimes uncontrollable. As a child, Jodie symbolizes him as “a lion in a cage”. As Jodie eventually gets older, he starts to respect her duties and continues to protect her. Aiden is the other character the player controls.
- **Nathan Dawkins** – A DPA researcher who has worked with Jodie since she was seven years old. He is portrayed similarly to a father figure towards her. Fifteen years ago, his wife and daughter died in a tragic car accident due to a drunk driver. He hopes to one day be able to communicate with the dead, specifically his dead family.
- **Ryan Clayton** – The love interest of Jodie. He is the CIA agent that recruits Jodie when she is an adult. At first he is harsh and rude to Jodie during her recruit training, but they then start to care for one another. This relationship becomes edgy when he lies to her about the mission she was ordered to complete in Somalia. The player can choose whether they should continue to love each other or not.
- **Cole Freeman** – Although not a main character, Cole would be considered an important minor character because, comparing to other people, he treats Jodie as a normal girl. He is the assistant researcher to Nathan Dawkins, and he too has watched Jodie grow up. Ever since they met when she was a little girl, he has always given her the nickname “Princess”, even as an adult. He deeply cares for her thus this represents him as an older brother. He is willing to help her out no matter how high the cost is, such as sneaking into her mother’s mental institution and aiding Jodie’s journey to destroy the Black Sun condenser.

Breakdown

This summary of the story will be explained in chronological order, not in the play order.

At the age of seven years old, Jodie Holmes has been the cause of devastating incidents due to her inability to control Aiden. After almost choking a neighbourhood boy to death with her “devilish” powers, her cruel foster father argues to take her to the DPA. As she meets researchers Nathan Dawkins and Cole Freeman, she explains that Aiden is

more than an imaginary friend, and mentions that “monsters” attack her frequently. The first night she stays at the lab ends up in chaos as she is attacked by the monsters (which are evil entities), as Nathan and Cole see proof from the tossed furniture. Some time passes and Jodie’s foster parents come and visit her, marking the last time she sees them. The player can choose to choke her father with Aiden, resulting in him calling her a monster. The game does not allow the player to actually kill her father. At that point on, Nathan takes good care of her as they occasionally conduct experiments with her and Aiden. One late night, Jodie sees two mysterious women standing behind Nathan glaring at her. The phone then rings claiming that Nathan’s wife (Helen) and daughter (Laura) have died in an accident due to a drunk driver. A few nights later, Laura’s ghost signals Jodie to follow her into Nathan’s office, who is still upset about his family’s death. For the first time, Jodie channels the spirits of Nathan’s loved ones to him and thus starts the beginning of his obsession towards the Infraworld.

As Jodie grows older and hits puberty, she has a hard time trying to fit in with normal people. She tries to attend Kirsten’s birthday party with the hope of being normal. She also goes through a punk/gothic phase where she becomes a risk-taker and sneaks out to go to a bar. If Jodie enters the bar, she will get sexually assaulted. A year or so later, a different facility specializing in Infraworld encounters an outbreak of entities being released from a portal, and Jodie must take the dangerous risk to shut it down.

The year Jodie turns eighteen, CIA agent Ryan Clayton appears to take her through three years of training. Saddened, Jodie cannot argue and is forced to pack her belongings and leave her friends at the DPA. Through tough training and field assignments, Jodie and Ryan fall in love with each other. If Jodie ends up being sexually assaulted at the bar during her earlier teenage years, she will have a mental breakdown in front of Ryan when they are about to make love.

After successfully finishing her CIA training, Jodie must assassinate a warlord in Somalia. After healing an injured boy named Salim, he helps Jodie get through the city carefully. When she successfully kills the warlord and his guards, a crying Salim comes in and sees that his father, one of the guards, is dead. Salim threatens Jodie and an angry mob starts to target her. Almost committing suicide, Ryan and her team fly in with a helicopter and save her. Once on the helicopter, she finds out that Ryan lied to her about her target being a warlord, but rather the elected President. She bails from the helicopter with Aiden’s help and is now being hunted by the CIA. If the player fails to run from the police, they will be arrested, and the player must play an extra scene where Aiden helps Jodie escape. This was done well from a narrative perspective because the player can actually feel punished from their actions by being arrested. Because of those consequences, the gameplay in this chapter feels real and powerful.

Continuing the story, Jodie eventually becomes homeless. She meets other homeless individuals and soon become a close family. Jodie uses Aiden’s power to help bring peace towards each of them, like channeling the dead, healing, etc. This scene was extremely heart-warming towards the player because they used Aiden’s power to help poor souls instead of cause destruction. It makes the player feel like they have blessed

these people. During the same night, the pregnant women of the group, Tuesday, goes into labour. This scene was again very heart-warming, because Jodie was able to help give birth to baby Zoey, without Aiden's powers. Eventually, a fire breaks out due to a group of heartless thugs and Jodie must save her new friends. It is possible for the players to not save Walter and/or Jimmy, two of the accompanying homeless individuals. This is the first time in the game where certain characters can die depending on the player's actions. Jodie later becomes hospitalized from these events for a few months.

Still on the run, Jodie will escape the hospital and be found by a patrol officer, and eventually end up in Navajo. She meets a native family and they give her food and shelter. She discovers that there is a mysterious entity haunting the area. Again, this chapter allows for one of the characters to die depending on the player's actions. Although this chapter had an interesting story, it did not seem like it was necessary for the main plot.

Tired of running, Jodie meets up with Cole to help her find her biological mother, Norah Grey, and finally gets the answers she has wanted for many years. Norah is a gifted individual who has telekinetic abilities, which explains why Jodie and Aiden are special. Norah is seen unresponsive because she was given drugs to stay unconscious for over twenty-four years. Aiden links Jodie and Norah's conscious together and for the first time, they speak to one another. This scene was very emotional because the idea of someone never truly meeting their real mother is upsetting. The player has the option to end Norah's misery. Afterwards, Jodie leaves the room to find CIA agents waiting behind the door.

The CIA takes Jodie back to the DPA, with Nathan now promoted to executive director. The CIA promises to let her live a normal life if she does them one favor; to destroy Kazirstan's newly built condenser that allows access to the Infraworld so that the technology is only available to the CIA. She is joined by Ryan and other colleagues to go on the mission. During the mission, Aiden gets trapped in a containment field and loses Jodie. Eventually, Jodie and Ryan will become captured by the General and the player has the choice to spill information about the mission, or to keep quiet during the interrogation. If the player does not respond, the General will harm Ryan by stabbing one of his eyes. Aiden eventually finds his way to Jodie and helps them escape and destroy the condenser. This was one of the only times in the game where the player was presented with a puzzle, which was to figure out how to get Aiden out of the trap.

With the CIA keeping their end of the bargain, Nathan offers Jodie a \$500,000 check and a new identity. The player can choose whether they want to accept the reward. Before saying goodbye, Nathan asks for Jodie's help in his secret project; a portal to the Infraworld called the Black Sun. Two faint spirits, identified as Nathan's late wife and daughter, are seen within the portal. He hopes to modify it to be able to communicate with them. He asks Jodie to help him channel his family. Jodie realizes that his wife and daughter are being tormented between two worlds, and that he is keeping them captive. Distressed by the anguish of his wife and child, Nathan accuses Jodie of tricking him.

When leaving Nathan's office, DPA officers knock Jodie out and take her to General McGrath. He does not know what to do with Jodie, he cannot let her go or kill her so they inject her with the same drugs her mother took. Nathan comes in to tell Jodie about releasing entities from the Infraworld and merging life and death into the same world. Jodie tries to warn them that death is dangerous, but he has gone mad.

At this point, Aiden is too weak to break Jodie free, so he goes and finds help from Cole and Ryan. This is again another challenge the player has to do as Aiden only. After Jodie is set free, hellish chaos is released from the Black Sun as hundreds of entities are entering the life plane. Through tough and challenging obstacles, an entity will attack Cole and the player must decide whether to save him or not. Eventually, Jodie will get close to the condenser and see Nathan having trouble finding his wife and daughter. Depending on the player's actions, he can commit suicide, or he can shoot Jodie while Aiden can choke him to death. If the player does not do anything when Nathan is about to shoot, Ryan will barge in and they will both die. Either way, Nathan will be reunited with his family. It is possible for Jodie to die before reaching the condenser if the player fails to press the appropriate buttons. This chapter is action-packed and many of the player's actions can result in character deaths. The fact that his chapter is very sensitive towards the player's choices leaves the player at the edge of their seat, and fully engaged.

When reaching the condenser, the truth about Aiden is revealed; he is Jodie's stillborn twin brother. After these events, Aiden becomes an entity unbound from Jodie. For the epilogue, the player gets to choose whether to live life or live beyond. The "beyond" ending results with only one ending in which Jodie becomes an entity similar to Aiden, while "life" results in the player choosing to live with either Ryan, the family in Navajo, or her once homeless friends with baby Zoey.

Successful Element

Aiden is an entity that Jodie sometimes cannot control, especially during childhood. Quantic Dream allows for the player to control Aiden, so the player can make him as destructive as possible, or respect Jodie's wishes. For example, when teenaged Jodie is invited to Kirsten's birthday party, Kirsten and her friends bully her about how she is a test subject in the DPA and that she is considered a freak. They lock her under the staircase and resume their party. In this case the player can choose to make Jodie leave the party or to have her revenge on those who bullied her. If revenge is chosen, the player controls Aiden and sabotages the party by throwing furniture at the teens and can even set the house on fire. There are many times throughout the game where Jodie yells at Aiden to stop and the player can choose whether to obey or not.

There are a few meaningful choices that actually affect the chapters later on. Going to the bar and getting sexually assaulted results in not having sex with Ryan in "The Dinner" chapter. Also, during the "Dragon's Hideout" chapter of the game, Jodie, Ryan and their team must infiltrate a secret base and destroy a condenser. Jodie and Ryan are then captured by the Kazirstan General who interrogates them about their mission.

The General threatens Jodie to tell him everything as he brings a knife up to Ryan's face. The player has the choice of telling the General about whom they are without him harming Ryan, or, the player does not press any buttons and says nothing, resulting in Ryan being stabbed in the eye. This does not change how the mission ends, but it does result in Ryan having an eye-patch for the remainder of the game.

The game is played through over twenty chapters of Jodie's life, not in chronological order. Cage carefully selected the order of the scenes so that there is still an understanding of Jodie's life, however at the beginning, this idea of jumping between different times of Jodie's life was rather annoying. This element at first seems intimidating because the player has only started engaging in the story, but David Cage's order of events begins to make sense as the story progresses. If the game made the player start as a seven-year-old girl, the player would have to watch her grow up, making it a very slow and boring process. This flashback scheme works a lot better because it allows the player to understand certain parts about Jodie's life and how she eventually got to the ending.

Near the end of the game, it is revealed to Jodie and the player that Aiden is actually her stillborn twin brother. This brings loose ends together and makes sense, especially the way they are represented towards each other. Jodie and Aiden constantly argue, and Aiden plays tricks on her like any annoying brother would. For example, when Jodie is preparing for her dinner and date, the doorbell rings indicating that Ryan, her date, is here early. When she opens the door it is nobody and it was actually Aiden fooling around to make her waste time. Through all the rough times they have had together, they are still over-protective of one another, and in the end they always love each other, just like ordinary siblings. Jodie and Aiden's bond is very strong.

Although this has nothing to do with the narrative element, the music score composed by the late Normand Corbeil and Lorne Balfe ties in and complements the story beautifully, resulting in an extraordinary emotional experience.

Unsuccessful Element

With a script of almost two thousand pages, the game is focused primarily on the narrative aspect more than gameplay experience. Because of this, this results with too much narrative and fewer gaming opportunities for the player. Some critics have said that this video game is considered to be an "interactive film".

The biggest concern about the game's narrative is the lack of serious consequences resulting from a meaningful choice. The story follows a pre-determined pathway the player must follow despite the decisions of the player. It is only at the very end, where the player can choose what ending they would like. *Beyond: Two Souls* only gives the player the illusion of choice and does not drastically change the story. When there is the chance to let Aiden choke Jodie's cruel foster father, the game does not allow Aiden to actually kill him, but rather have him threaten young Jodie and call her a

monster. No matter how bad the player wanted to take revenge on Jodie's foster father, he is unable to die and therefore, does not change the story. The choices they give are more like character developing tools, such as the player choosing if Aiden should be destructive or not, or if Jodie should lie or be sincere with a person.

Beyond: Two Souls is not about the destination, but rather the journey. It has a storyline already planned out, and the player can choose how those characters develop. The meaningful choices the game provides barely scratch the story (expect the ending where the player picks how they want to end).

Moreover, there are some scenes where the player can exit a room. When the player wants to leave and interact with the door, a question will pop up asking the player if they are sure they want to leave. This only appears if the player did not complete everything intended in the room, so even if the player does not interact with the required objects, it will not drastically change the story of the chapter, making this element intimidating and useless.

Although the narrative and music score tie in beautifully, the gameplay is lacking potential. The gameplay is mainly just walk here, pick this up, open this door, audio choices, and playing as Aiden. The game seems so swallowed up with narrative, that there really isn't any engaging gameplay. It ends up losing the realistic appeal the game has been trying to create. It is not balanced properly.

A minor thing to add is Nathan's character development seems a bit sudden. While Jodie was busy running away from the CIA, Nathan was promoted to Executive Director. Nathan Dawkins' character development near the end of the game does not appear to be very convincing. Within a short amount of time, he goes from wanting to create a portal that will communicate with the dead, to all of a sudden, releasing life and death into one world, not realizing how twisted and dangerous it really is. It seemed like the developers wanted to quickly initiate the devastating events of the Black Sun. The developers should have added an extra scene where Nathan comes to the revelation of combining the life and death planes, as opposed to abruptly telling Jodie his idea.

Highlight

One of the saddest and slowest chapters was "The Homeless" chapter. It introduced Jodie still on the run and now with no food or warmth until she meets Stan, another homeless individual. He takes her back to their camp and Jodie uses Aiden's power to help find peace within the four homeless people. This allowed the player to feel like they were using Aiden's powers to provide blessings, rather than chaos. When Jodie channels Stan's dead wife's spirit, he is brought to tears and thanks Jodie. They soon respect Jodie and see her as a gift to them, and become a family. Later on, Tuesday (one of the homeless at their camp) goes into labour. Jodie must be the mid-wife and help Tuesday give birth with the little knowledge and materials they have. When her baby girl, Zoey, is born, it is a truly touching scene with all of them gathered around. They allowed

for this depressing and slow chapter to be worthwhile as a bright and beautiful miracle has blossomed. What makes this scene even more special is that this was all Jodie's doing, not Aiden's. This moment is the greatest in narrative, a memorable moment, and it really stands out. This makes the player realize although these people have nearly nothing in their painful and tough lives, there will always be a miracle. The moment is concluded when Stan is fortunate to have met Jodie as he says to her "You're a miracle Jodie ... our miracle."

Another emotional moment was meeting Jodie's real mother, Norah. For the first time, Jodie understands what truly happened to herself and her biological mother. After all of the horrible events that have occurred, it was the first time Jodie was truly happy. Ellen Page's performance really emphasised this heart-breaking chapter.

Critical Reception

Beyond: Two Souls generally received some mixed and positive reviews, considered a love-hate scenario by critics. Be minded that many of these reviews are biased by comparing *Beyond: Two Souls* with Quantic Dream's previous video game, *Heavy Rain*. They should be treated like two different video games.

- IGN – Lucy O'Brien – 6/10: IGN praised Ellen Page's performance and the game itself demonstrates an emotional experience. "What's missing, then, is the actual game built around this story" says O'Brien. She explains the pros of the meaningful choices that are given: "There are, of course, choices: on Quantic's whim, you can choose how Jodie responds in conversation, whether she'll dance at a party or not, or take revenge on someone who has wronged her." She then describes the cons: "But unlike the critical decisions you make in *Heavy Rain*, *Beyond's* choices feel small, and the story will storm onward no matter how they are played out [...] It's disappointingly unadaptable." She also agrees that *Beyond: Two Souls* has a "tightly scripted story".
- Videogamer – Steve Burns – 4/10: Burns presents a negative perspective towards the game as he says, it "doesn't feel like you're really participating in the story." Again, this relates towards what IGN had to say about the game's "tightly scripted story". Burns goes on saying "It's a thriller without any intrigue, a character study bereft of character, and a game short of actual gameplay." He disagrees with the acting performance and says the characters are not very fulfilling. Burns also mentions that he does not enjoy the order of the chapters as he states that with "the decision to hop back and forth between different stages of Jodie's life: with no character building or conspiracy to work out, they become pace-sagging vignettes, exposition masquerading as interactivity." Agreeing with what was told earlier, "the narrative's problems feed into the mechanics. Aiden's powers – and how they're exerted – are woefully inconsistent with the story, and the game is utterly straightforward in its moment-to-moment interaction with the player." Burns concludes and says that he was expecting a "Heavy Rain 2".

- Gamespot – Tom McShea – 9/10: While IGN and Videogamer are iffy on the narrative choices; McShea from Gamespot was extremely impressed with the game, giving it a near-perfect score. The game “does an impressive job of not breaking the narrative when you fail.” “Every success and failure is yours to live with, molding what kind of person Jodie grows into as you make your way through the lengthy story.” McShea also mentions that it has a “grounded story that examines human failings” with “choices [that] let you develop Jodie and Aiden as you wish.” There were absolutely no cons mentioned in the review. With all of these positive comments, Gamespot actually appreciates the pre-determined storyline and is not being biased towards Quantic Dream for not creating a “Heavy Rain 2”.

Lessons

- Lesson 1 – Hiring award winning actors pays off as they demonstrate their acting skills in an extraordinary fashion. They show great perseverance towards their character’s personal development. For example, Jodie goes from being a stubborn and selfish punk teenager to a responsible and strong woman, willing to take the risk of almost sacrificing herself in dangerous tasks. Many other games lack this strong sense of acting, so the characters end up feeling dull and unengaging.
- Lesson 2 – The player can still have meaningful choices that do not have to change the story, making this cheaper and more time-efficient when creating the game. For example, in the “Experiment” chapter (the first time the player interacts as Aiden), Aiden can sabotage the lab and ignore Jodie’s commands, or, listen and switch back to Jodie. No matter how the player acts as Aiden, there will be a cut scene where Nathan comforts the horrified Jodie seen with a nosebleed. This also occurs in the “Not Like Other Girls” chapter, where Jodie must defend herself in the bar from the three assailants. The player can interact as Aiden to kill the pursuers, or spook them by tossing furniture. In the end, it does not matter how the players deal with the situation; Jodie will end up being sent home.
- Lesson 3 – The order of chapters can really change the message the game is portraying. Games can learn a few things about managing the order of chapters, so the player is given only a certain amount of information they truly need. It also allows the player to not forget any important details because of the way the chapters are connected. For example, Cage put the chapter “Welcome to the CIA” before “Hunted” so the player can understand that Jodie went through CIA training, and becomes hunted for treason. This leaves the player wondering what she has done wrong to the CIA. The non-linear order of the chapters also makes the player put the pieces of the story together themselves, and thus it becomes a more engaging experience.

Summation

The reason this game deserved a narrative analysis was because this game is heavily focused on narrative elements. So much narrative, that it leads towards the discussion on whether this video game should actually be considered an interactive film. David Cage is a master at storytelling and has a talent for triggering emotional thoughts in players, but the storytelling aspect overpowers the gameplay experience, which is a more prominent component in video games.

In the end, *Beyond: Two Souls* is an outstanding and memorable experience, but its major problem was merging its great story with their gameplay scheme. It just goes to show that sometimes creating too much narrative makes it very challenging to create a well-thought gameplay experience.