Dragon Age: Origins

Fantasy role-playing games, bow before your new king

Dragon Age: Origins is the first in a new franchise from role-playing powerhouse BioWare, and while its swords 'n' sorcery setting may, at first glance, appear to be the result of an especially fruitful attempt at robbing J.R.R. Tolkien's grave, don't let that fool you. Dragon Age may very well contain one of the finest, most compelling videogame worlds ever created.

But that on its own isn't what makes Dragon Age great. Rather, the game's heart lies smack-dab at the intersection between setting and character development. It's a fine line that many sprawling RPGs attempt to walk, yet BioWare has managed to cross the proverbial tightrope with startling ease. Chalk it up to years of experience with similar games, but with Dragon Age, BioWare has truly perfected its craft.

The story initially appears to be something of a straight line but quickly spins out into a complex web, with you at the center. It's a surprisingly personal experience—especially when contrasted with other story-based RPGs—that begins with your choice of an origin story. Depending on your race/class combination, you'll encounter any one of multiple, wildly different opening scenarios. Your origin, then, follows you through the rest of the game. Human, elf, or dwarf, male or female, rich or poor—the whole

This is more or less your default camera view—though, more often than not, giant lightning balls don't cloud your vision.
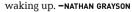
game changes in ways both big and small to reflect your humble (or not-so-humble) beginnings.

Dragon Age's supporting cast is equally diverse and well developed. We won't spoil anything, but let's just say that you'll be forced to make some incredibly difficult choices over the course of the game. At different times, it's both tear-jerking and goofy grin–inducing, but regardless, you will feel something when you play Dragon Age. Through the overarching plot and endearingly humorous mini-conversations your party conducts while strolling around, characters take on lives of their own. We could spend countless pages discussing our interactions with the game's cast. Needless to say, we loved it.

But what's a fantasy epic without a healthy dose of sword-swinging and spell-slinging? Fortunately, Dragon Age gives turn-based action a much-needed kick in the pants, literally coating combat in blood with a multitude of techniques and hard-hitting magic. Don't think, however, that battles are mindless affairs.

In reality, Dragon Age's battles can be taxingly tactical, and while the PC version's exclusive pulled-back camera view makes the action much more manageable, Dragon Age is hard, but never unfairly so. Experiment with strategies and you'll be rewarded. The game also alleviates some of your stress by allowing you to automate party members with customizable tactics. Meticulous micromanagement, however, wins the day more often than not, and if you're not into that kind of thing, you'll probably want to play on easy. For those whose brains have been starved by recent RPG offerings, though, Dragon Age's combat system is just what the doctor ordered. Just bear in mind that between the game's complex combat and meager tutorial, neophytes need not apply.

After nearly 50 hours with Dragon Age, we couldn't bear the thought of finishing the game. To us, it was like some kind of amazing dream, and we simply despised the idea of waking up. **–NATHAN GRAYSON**

Battles are surprisingly action-packed for turn-based affairs.

VERDICT 9

DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS

➕ DRAGONS	➖ DUNGEONS
Well-written characters and story line; challenging but not frustrating tactical battles; hours upon hours of content.	A huge graphical leap backward from Mass Effect; unabashedly tailored toward experienced RPG players.

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