

Well-Played Narrative Adaptivity

Consequentiality and Story Pathways in Dreamfall Chapters

V. Elizabeth Owen (Age of Learning)

Abstract

Dreamfall Chapters, a new episodic RPG from Red Thread Games, innovates on its legacy action-adventure genre by developing choice-customized narrative. In addition to the role-playing immersion offered by user-adaptive narrative, the game enriches story through multi-dimensional characters, strong dialogue and voice acting, and story-aligned mechanics. Although imperfect, the single-player *Chapters* breaks ground in the frontier of branching, user-adaptive story progression—while holding a steady, deep tone in character development and dialogue that remains true to its classic RPG roots.

Introduction

A deep violet haze slowly fades in on the screen. The hypnotic beep, keeping time with a heartbeat, serves as a soundtrack to the swelling scene: a misty, twilight valley bordered by cold, icy peaks. Jagged pale rocks dot the landscape and form a twisted, floating frame of where you stand against the frigid wind, staring resolutely at the horizon. You are Zoe, a woman trapped between consciousness and dreams, struggling to find continued life while your body lies in a coma. Behind you, as if through a window into the physical world, you can see your own still figure unconscious in a hospital bed, kept alive through the steady percussion of life support. Your psyche continues to thrive, however, in this between-realm of Storytime—a place between physical worlds—as you struggle to find meaning in past events and a way forward.

This mystic scene opens the choice-driven, compelling and lushly-depicted journey of *Dreamfall: Chapters*¹, a new episodic RPG released by Red Thread Games. Kickstarted by over 21,000 backers, this project literally manifested the sheer will of the series' hardcore fans. The first game, *The Longest Journey*² (*TLJ*), was a critically acclaimed point-and-click adventure game (1999) which introduced the settings of Stark (a modern world of science) and Arcadia (a timeless world of magic) as parallel worlds. Events in one have ripple effects into the other, requiring an equilibrium of chaos and logic to preserve the larger Balance. The follow-up game *Dreamfall*³ (2006 Game of the Year⁴) blew open the genre as an action-adventure RPG, introducing more open-world, first-person movement and combat mechanics as part of play strategy. This sequel introduced Zoe Castillo as a heroine, with an edgy, modern, corporate-

1. <http://redthreadgames.com/games/chapters/>

2. <http://www.longestjourney.com/>

3. <http://www.dreamfall.com/>

4. Gamespot.com

themed conspiracy spurring the Stark-based plot forward. Enter *Dreamfall: Chapters*, which picks up the thread in the shoes of Zoe in the eerie calm of Storytime.

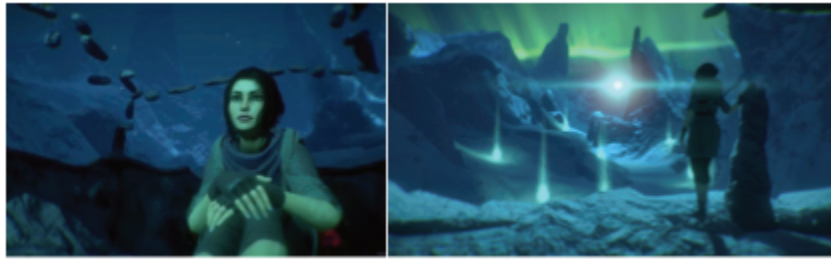


Figure 1. Zoe in storytime.

An Overview: Branching Paths, Deep Characters, and Story-Aligned Mechanics

From Zoe’s opening scene, *Chapters* launches the player into an immersive, choice-based world—whose main storyline morphs in adaptation to the player’s individual choices, and where moment-to-moment decisions in the game have fundamental, long-term narrative consequentiality (c.f. Gee, 2003). In Storytime, Zoe is immediately faced with situations in which her choices will have long-term narrative impact—on both a small and large scale. One instance is her approach of a young girl who is stuck in a frightening nightmare. In interacting with her, the player has the power to treat the girl with kindness or cruelty, which has narrative impact later in the game. On a broader scale, at the end of the Storytime scene, Zoe must make a pivotal decision in order to help herself survive the coma. This is a major life event that splits the main storyline into two diverging paths. In this sense, *Dreamfall* immediately institutes narrative adaptivity in way that it’s original, strictly linear predecessor did not. Not only can this be seen as an expansion of the series, but it newly leverages the single-player RPG genre to optimize narrative adaptivity.

Strengthening these player-adaptive narrative paths, the debut Storytime chapter highlights other strengths of *Chapters* that contributes to its story-driven immersion: multi-dimensional characters, and story-aligned mechanics.

Thoughtful, Complex Characters

First, Zoe herself exemplifies the deeply conceived, multi-dimensional nature of many characters in *Dreamfall*. For the most part, dialogue is witty and well-crafted, and the voice acting is superb across the board. Zoe is a humble, complex human, which we can see from her inner monologue. For example, in commentary during Storytime, she notes wistfully that her father (whose relationship with Zoe is complicated) comes and visits her hospital bedside a lot, and that she doesn’t know how to feel about it. “He keeps apologizing—I wish he wouldn’t,” she admits. Honest fluctuations between fear and curiosity are tempered with heartening touches of well-delivered humor, particularly in her search to move beyond the (relative) comfort zone of Storytime. Later, in order to find a way out, she actually confronts herself (a younger, more judgmental alter ego). “Did you think it was going to be that easy?” younger Zoe quips, dripping with sarcasm. “Sayonara to Storytime, hello second chances?” Indeed, her own former

self proves formidable, and reveals a deep, plausible complexity around themes of past, deep guilt, and the power of self-forgiveness.

Characters as vehicles for confronting bias in the immediate worlds of Stark and Arcadia is also a recurring theme in the game. Around gender, for example, the lead character Zoe is not built in an exploitive, superficial way. In addition to having a real, complex personality, her physique does not mimic a Croft-like stereotypical female avatar. Other women characters in the story are also realistically proportioned, avoiding the busty, emaciated stereotype: these include Enu, a young fighter that Zoe encounters; Shepard, the leader of fighters; and Saga, a woman that helps Zoe complete her journey. In addition, these characters carry importance in the story in their own right—not relative to a male character (as a sexual object, arm candy, love interest or otherwise).

Characters in the game also challenge bias around sexual orientation and race. A lead character in the story reveals himself as gay, with no shame or closeting, despite overt assumptions to the contrary by other well-meaning NPCs. (In the real world, this revelation in the game's third episode was in delightful challenge to thousands of heterosexual female fans who previously expressed, er, very enthusiastic admiration for the character's well-built physique and a desire to foster in-game heterosexual romance.) In addition, two key female characters cultivate a healthy, grounded romantic partnership without hypersexualized fanfare or exploitation. These pivotal, strong, relatable characters with a variety of sexual orientations embody an egalitarian perspective on sexuality and gender. Through elements of story and character, the game also tackles injustice of institutionalized racism as a major theme. Broadly, the story unfolds around the mistreatment of an entire race by the martial rulers of a province, and hinges on the efforts of main characters Zoe and Kian to uncover inhumane, genocidal behavior and stop it from happening. Several supporting characters are members of the victimized race, and the player intimately gets to know the stories of each—and the complex cycle of atrocities committed by both sides.

Story-Aligned Mechanics

Interactions with these rich characters are fueled by intuitive mechanics. For example, pivotal moments like the self-confrontation scene introduce intuitive interaction mechanics that are naturally aligned to story direction. Solid integration of story and mechanics, are considered essential for sustaining a narrative-driven magic circle (c.f. Salen & Zimmerman, 2004) in a good RPG (Costikyan, 2001). In the case of *Chapters*, a game which has no combat and hinges around narrative progression and character development, mechanics provide the means to immersively interact with the story environment. In *Chapters*, these include context-specific abilities, like the ability to slow time and connect to a person's subconscious (specific to Storytime), as well as a tracking mechanism that marks pivotal decisions. In the self-confrontation scene, Zoe uses the subconscious-connection ability to communicate with her comatose being. (Intuitively, this ability is no longer available when Zoe is back in her native "real world" of Stark.) In interaction with most NPCs, there is an extensive dialogue system which gives agency in selected topic and response choice. Similar to *TLJ*, there's also an inventory system in which stored objects are used to interact with the surrounding world. This manages to feel intuitive and not overused, with often just one or two items collected at a time, and sans far-fetched inventory-based puzzles.

In addition to player affordances that make sense situationally, the game visualizes pivotal moments of choice transparently. When a player is presented with a decision that will have some future impact, the interface will light up with an exclamation point in the upper right of the screen. If a more major

decision is being made, an additional metric called the “Balance” will show up: an elaborate twisted circle in the bottom center of the screen. When the player’s choice is selected, the Balance will light up and show a shifting animation. “The balance has shifted,” the screen will show, and at this point, it’s clear the player has made a choice that impacts a major story direction. This balance shift is introduced early in the game, and recurs throughout the game, as the player carves their own path through Stark and Arcadia in this game’s visit, with the entertaining opportunity to play as both Zoe and Kian (an anti-genocide resistance fighter). Ultimately, the small choices (with the exclamation icon) have satisfying, long-term consequences that can affect the state of the gameworld, and relationships with NPCs, but do not typically alter the main story arc. Decisions that “shift the balance” are more major, and usually result in impact on the main storyline—if not an outright split in the underlying narrative.

Deep into Branching Paths: Narrative Adaptivity

Delving deeper into decisions that impact story, it’s possible to visualize forking story paths that characterize *Chapters*’ core narrative adaptivity. Instead of the classic point-and-click adventure game formula (e.g. *Syberia*⁵, *TLJ*) of a purely linear story, *Chapters* allows choice to open different experiences and even alter the main storyline based on the individual player’s decisions. Figure 2 is a simplified visualization of this idea, in which the blue circles represent main storyline points, green and purple represent minor choices (which have lasting impact on the state of the gameworld, but don’t affect the main storyline), and yellow and red circles to represent major choices that can dramatically alter the main story path. For example, in the Storytime opening, Zoe has choices about whether she can treat others with kindness or cruelty (see left-most green and purple dots, Figure 2). This has impact on later relationships with NPCs, but does not majorly alter the storyline. For example, choosing to treat the girl having a nightmare (a green/purple choice) with cruelty—or kindness—has impact in the way she interacts with Zoe later on in the story. This minor choice being reflected in a later point in the story is shown below as the dotted line. Although fundamental plot isn’t altered, these early choices can greatly impact the player’s experience with the game’s setting and characters in future story points. In Zoe’s next step on the map, she makes a major life decision at the end of the Storytime scene, which presents a major branching choice (red/yellow below). The player’s verdict here actually changes the main storyline drastically, creating a whole different set of events to experience (and enhancing replayability). Each of these narrative chunks may have their own branches (last column of green/purple), and ultimately can culminate in very different endings of the episode (and extend across all).

5. <http://www.syberia.microids.com/EN/>

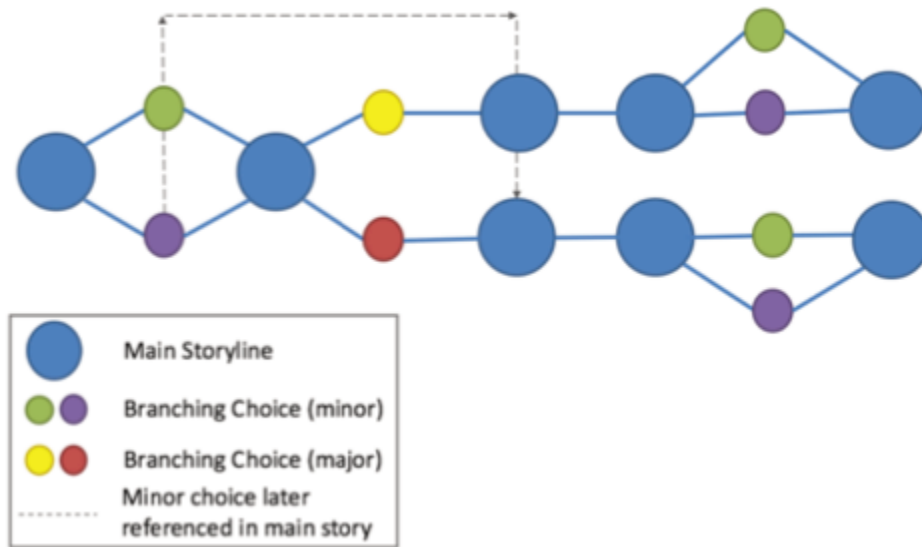


Figure 2. Simplified adaptive story visualization in Chapters.

This model is in contrast to other game models like a completely linear traditional adventure game, and many MMO RPGs. These games, broadly, tend to have one fixed main narrative with optional side quests (in varying quantities) that don't impact main story events. Figure 3 gives a simplified visualization of progression in games in which side quests occur with little to no bearing on the single, linear main quest line.

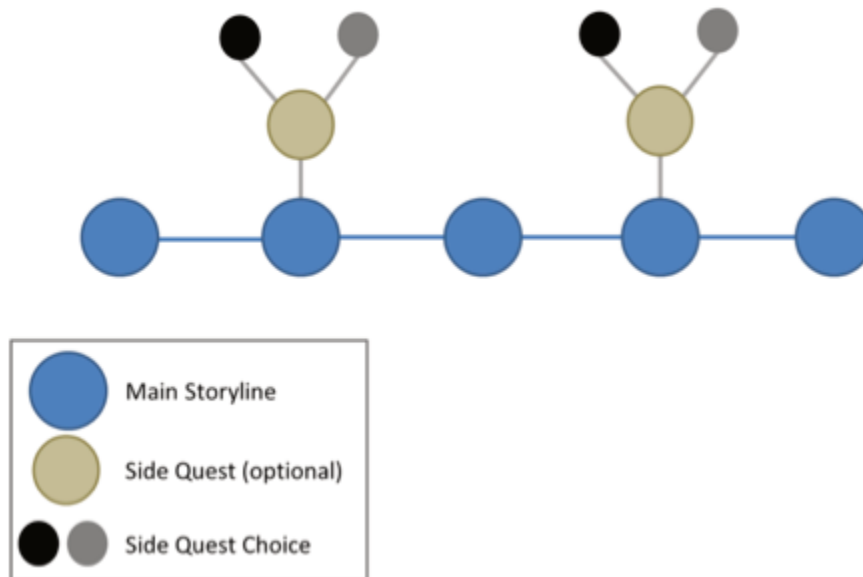


Figure 3. Simplified linear story visualization with side quests.

Classic adventure RPGs like *TLJ*, *Syberia*, and *Myst*⁶ are great examples of narrative-based games with a linear story line. Side quests can be offered in these games, but they are generally few and far between. Gameplay hinges on a single linear story: the player is taken through a series of immersive environments

6. <http://cyan.com/games/myst>

and must solve puzzles (often constrained with a single correct solution) as a “checkpoint” to pass to the next major static plot point. These games are natural predecessors to a game like *Chapters*, which places an emphasis on immersive interaction with the world and NPC characters—with some inventory-based progression and no combat. However, *Chapters* feels more like an action RPG, because players move around third person in a dynamic, “3D” world⁷, and “point and click” is transformed into interaction which requires dynamic movement, exploration, and navigation skill. Timing and sneak come into play as well, which adds an action dynamic to the game. Perhaps the most fundamental difference, however, is the branching, choice-responsive narrative (Figure 2), contrasted with the linear plot in Figure 3.

MMO RPGs also tend to have a single fixed main story peppered with optional side quests (Figure 3). These side quests (in tan, Figure 3) generally happen in complete isolation and have no bearing on the main story line. This may be, in part, a constraint of the genre, which necessitates a shared player environment which cannot easily record or accurately reflect the choices of any given individual. The PvE (player versus environment) tracks of MMOs like *WoW*⁸, *WildStar*⁹, and *TERA*¹⁰ follow this formula. Other newer MMOs have the same main-plus-compartmentalized-side-quest structure, but attempt to engage the player in interesting choices around side quest outcomes. These include games like *Star Wars: The Old Republic*¹¹ (*SWTOR*) and *Elder Scrolls Online*¹² (*ESO*). For example, in a regional side quest, a player can decide whether a repentant criminal deserves a second chance or should be sent to the gallows. The choice doesn’t impact the main story; however, there is 1) some agency in choosing the outcome and 2) an attempt to give the decision some persistent consequence. Based on player decisions, *SWTOR* awards dark side or light side points across all quests (affecting avatar appearance, and gear availability). In *ESO*, NPCs may reference the choice in random dialogue, and an outcome can unlock special player properties (new avatar movements, or achievements and new armor dyes). These games overlap with *Chapters* as RPGs with adventure elements, but clearly feature more combat and have different constraints (especially in accommodation of multitudes of live players acting on a single world state). In contrast to *Chapters*, the main story is not always at the center of play in these MMOs. However, if the MMO main storyline is not always required for immediate leveling up, it is often the only way to open a new area of the map (needed for future leveling) or unlock critical gear.

Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, *Dreamfall: Chapters* builds on its classic adventure predecessors in an ambitious attempt to customize player narrative and immersion in a 3D-modeled, interactive world. It’s carefully crafted characters and themes of social egalitarianism strengthen this effort, while aligning interface and most game mechanics to feel intuitive to each situation.

Like any game, however, *Chapters* has its limitations. It blatantly bills itself as an immersive story game; nonetheless, RPG fans who are combat-oriented will likely find play tedious. Some mechanics are a bit clunky—like awkward timing of stealth missions, and (in early episodes) the mind-numbing necessity of roaming around an entire city for hours to find a single object or character. Facial animations could be

7. not in the VR sense, but more that objects are modeled in 3D, and the player moves around the city from a third person camera perspective (rather than just watching the character walk around on a fixed 2D drawing on the screen, like older adventure games).

8. <http://us.battle.net/wow/en>

9. <http://www.wildstar-online.com>

10. <http://tera.enmasse.com>

11. <http://www.swtor.com>

12. <http://www.elderscrollsonline.com>

a bit more convincing (especially in main character Kian), and earlier episodes (before the recent Unity revamp) were graphically uneven, with some characters rendered in lovely detail and others drawn more coarsely. At times the storyline feels over-ambitious, occasionally going down an inception-like rabbit hole that can be difficult to track. Lastly, the main story line splits early and ultimately converges back into a single line for the ending of the game; while minor decisions still are reflected in the ending, final outcomes may not vary greatly enough for some fans.

Ultimately, however, *Chapters* is a lovingly crafted RPG with consequentiality and customized narrative, story-aligned mechanics, multi-dimensional characters, and strong dialogue and voice acting. Red Thread's incredibly time-consuming dedication to creating parallel main story paths for the sake of player adaptivity is admirable, and the deep metaphors of balance, self-realization, tolerance and forgiveness hold true from predecessors *The Longest Journey* and *Dreamfall*. Overall, *Chapters* breaks ground in the frontier of branching, user-adaptive narrative—while holding a steady, deep tone in character development and dialogue that remains true to its classic RPG roots.

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