

Game Review: Betrayal at Krondor

Nicholas Fang – nfang@cs.stanford.edu - SUID 4495024



Game Information and Credits

Betrayal at Krondor, © 1993

Developed by Dynamix (a division of Sierra On-Line)

Published by Sierra On-Line

Design

John Cutter

Lead Programming

Nels Bruckner

Programming

Steve Cordon, Timothy Screlchun

Graphics / 3D Programming

Damon Mitchell, Vance Naegle

Level / Scenario Design

Neal Hallford

Graphics / Artwork

D. Brent Burkett, Rhonda Conley, John Garvin,
Viggi Hippler, Robert Kraft, Peter Lewis, Sean
Murphy, Tito Pagan

Music

Jan Paul Moorhead

Art Director

Mike McHugh

Cover Art

D. Brent Burkett, Roger Smith

Documentation

Barbara Ray, Sue Roberts

Director

John Cutter

Writing / Dialogue / Story

Raymond E. Feist, Neal Hallford

Playtesting

Gerald Azenaro, Corey Boyer, Tim Boyer, James
Domico, Oliver Fellguth, Brent Gilbert, Robert
Harrington, Dan Hinds, Chris Hunt, David M.
Tatum, Wayland M. Wasserman, Wesley
Malespino, Zachary Marcus, Penny May, Chris
Medinger, Joseph Muennich, Sam Nicols, Warren
P. Gunther, Duri Price, Jeff Rolloson Halhuber,
Chris Singleton, Lewece T. Champetier, John Wolf
Forrest Walker

Quality Assurance

Acting / Voiceovers

Sher Alltucker, Danette Artusy, Mark Baker, Kevin Barclay, Allen Beausoleil, Stan Boyd, Thyra Boyd, Rogert Canaga, Jan Carpenter, Jane Chase, Bill Chilla, Keith Cooper, Todd Croson, Richard D. Mitchell, Sylvan DuPlant, Ted Ellis, Roger Emmert, Howard Epstein, Laura Fulks, David Gauntlett, Joseph Gilg, John Gilpatrick, Kim Harris, Tucker Hatfield, Viggi Hippler, Stan Jackson, Daniel Kaufman, John Keeys, Michael Kovcholovsky, Robert Kraft, Chris Leebrick, Peter Lewis, Greg Mantell, Zachary Marcus, Samuel Martinez, Eric Milligan, Tuan Myers, Jan Paul Moorhead, Stanley Pender, Bill Reed, Alan Roberts, Ken Rogers, Earl Ruttencutter, Marc Siegel, David Snider, Justin Stafford, Colleen Tunnell, John Urhammer, Mark Verrier, Alan Wagner, Dennis Williams, Douglas Zalud-Mackie

Special Thanks To

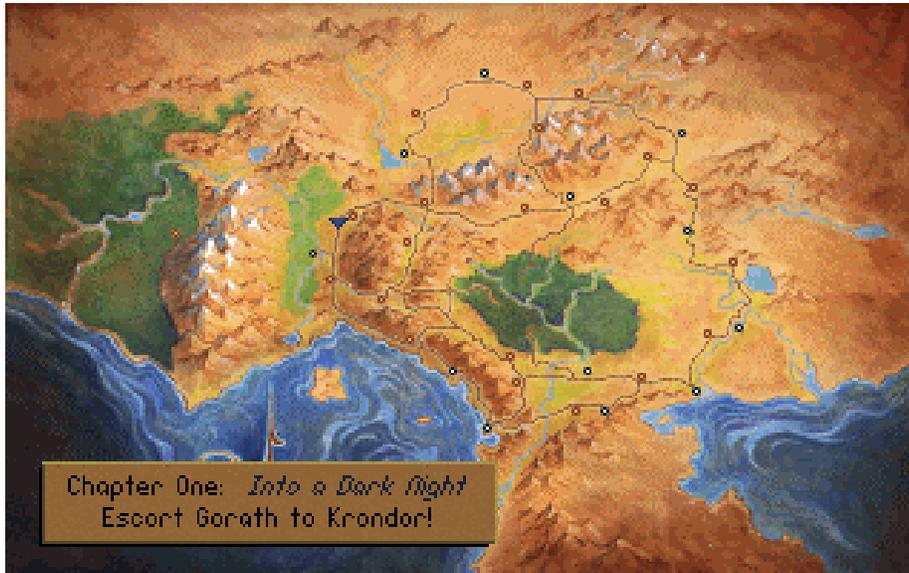
Kerrie Abbott, David Aughenbaugh, Mike Boyersmith, Mark Brenneman, Michelle Cordon, Melanie Cutter, Jenny Gray, Dan Hinds, Bob Lindstrom, Dariusz Lukaszuk, Jerry Lutrell, Joel Mariano, Kyle Miller, Mark Potter, Tony Reyneke, Kim Screlchun, Janna Silverstein, Jeff Tunnell, Thomas Van Velkinburg

Introduction

Among games of the role-playing genre, there has traditionally been a division between two principal styles of game designs. On one hand is what are often called the *story-driven RPGs*, in which the role playing elements are wrapped around relatively linear gameplay designed to draw the player into and give them a part in a well conceived and put together storyline. In these games, the players often take the roles of pre-generated characters with already specified personalities and histories that are well fleshed out, allowing for stronger character development and better integration between the characters and the story. Console role-playing games, for a variety of reasons, have often fallen into this camp. On the other hand, we have the *freeform RPGs* that are frequently more popular on the PC. In these, the focus is on the characters' stat development and their unbounded participation in a world. Though there is a story in these games, this story is usually very loosely structured and is just a thin excuse for the player's explorations (for example, find the eight pieces of the staff to save the world). These games are more flexible in what the player does and allow for more random wandering and random events. The user also frequently generates the characters from scratch, so the player feels more like they themselves are participating in that world. The tradeoff here is that the lack of structure and linearity coupled with characters that aren't pre-generated make it more difficult to have a strongly cohesive story.

In recent years, though, this division has begun to break down. Recent story-driven RPGs begin to adopt more side events and possibilities, building a more freeform world for the player to interact with. At the same time, the freeform RPGs have started crafting a more complete and compelling story. This blending of design philosophies can be traced through certain games through the years, and one of the earliest, most influential, and ultimately most enjoyable and successful of these is *Betrayal at Krondor*.

Basic Storyline



Betrayal at Krondor is set in a land called Midkemia, and is based on Raymond E. Feist's literary series *The Riftwar Saga*. Not only set in Feist's world, Feist himself co-wrote the story for the game. This basing of the game on an already existing, rich world was a rarity at the time (and in fact, still is) and having a well-established author pen the storyline was even more rare, but had great and positive ramifications for the game's design and execution. This contributed ultimately to its success and to an advancement of the genre.

The basic storyline begins innocuously enough, with the player's characters escorting a Moredhel turncoat bringing tidings of an attack on Midkemia (the Moredhel are the enemies to the north). Taking the role of several preset characters, this escort mission becomes an investigation of this aggression, a determination of the truth behind the war and its inciters, and a desperate race to prevent the coming onslaught. No summary, however, can describe the richness with which this story is told and the intricacies and details of its plotline.

Interestingly enough, the story was strong enough to be adapted for the beginnings of a new book series, *The Riftwar Legacy*, a continuation of Feist's original series. In a sense, this completes the cycle from book to game and back. This is telling of how well the story of this game was crafted. As we will soon see with the game design's roots in the

freeform RPG tradition, this was accomplished without imposing the strict linear structure that follows many of the story-driven RPGs.

Basic Gameplay

No story in the world could make a game great on its own. Another important part of *Betrayal at Krondor* is its well-crafted gameplay. The gameplay is centered around two distinct modes.

One is the world and exploration mode. Here the game has some innovations that were rare at the time. The view is a first person one, where the player explores the world, searches for items, and interacts with people. Unlike the first person games that preceded it, though, there is no set grid of squares that restrict you to moving in the four cardinal directions. Instead, much like the first person games that are so prolific today, the player is free to move in any direction they wish; the world is completely modeled rather than built in square sized chunks. The following screenshot demonstrates this view. The top half is your view of the world and the bottom left shows the three characters you currently control.



The other mode is combat, where encounters with the enemy occur. This is done in a turn-based fashion, on a square grid that you can see in the following screen shot. Each character and enemy takes turns executing moves and attacks, with the player controlling each of his characters in turn. The fighting itself was almost strategic, with range and movement playing a part in successful combat tactics.



One other gameplay element of note: magic is handled in a unique way, with spells being chosen and then a certain amount of Health/Stamina being spent on casting the spell. Spending more of the caster's energy results in a stronger result but weakens that character, creating an interesting balance not present in the majority of games that separate life and magic power.

Game Technologies

Though it contains many of the other technological elements that all RPGs need such as enemy AI and keeping track of the state of the world, *Betrayal at Krondor* also pioneered several techniques that were not common among RPGs for its time. These are worth noting separately.

The unique view of the world and free movement along that world presented some unique challenges. The usual way to display game worlds was through sprites, pre-drawn bitmapped graphics that were pieced together to represent certain locations. While this is easy to handle with preset squares, how do you make it so that you can move anywhere and face any direction?

The answer that the coders of *Betrayal at Krondor* came up with was to use polygons extensively, describing many of the elements of the world as polygonal objects. The benefit to this is that polygons are easy to rotate, move, and otherwise manipulate, so that the player could be anywhere and see those objects scaled and placed in the right place smoothly. For more complicated objects, bitmapped sprites were still used, but they also had the concept of several sides, making the illusion of a cohesive world more complete.

Additionally, looking at the screenshots shows that the characters, as opposed to the elements of the interface or the rendering of the world, look surprisingly lifelike for a game of its time, especially compared to the relatively simple graphics of the world itself. This is because the game uses video capture of actual actors; thousands of frames of

animation generated from these videos was used in composing this game, which makes the combat look more realistic as well as the people in scenes in the rest of the game.

Game Design Innovations

It is in the game design in which this game truly shines, and where it innovates the genre. *Betrayal at Krondor* is a masterful blending of the story-driven and freeform RPG subgenres that subsequently became more and more popular. How was it that *Betrayal at Krondor* successfully blended these two types of RPGs?

There are many freeform design choices involved in the gameplay. The world is fully modeled, with people going about their lives. Each of them offers their own dialog, adventures, and quests to the player. At the same time, thanks to Feist there is a very strong story. The story is structured into nine separate chapters to reinforce the idea that it is intended to be like exploring an interactive book. Each chapter has a separate overarching task to proceed to the next chapter. It is in pursuing these tasks that the story develops, but during each chapter, the entire world is open for exploration and interaction. The goals are varied and are often just very vague descriptions such as “Find the Spider and the Spyglass,” which only make sense as you progress through the story and explore the world. The goals end up having multiple parts, and the player is free to pursue them at any rate they choose.

There are enough things happening outside the main plot and side-quests to undertake that the main plot can be delayed for long periods of time just to explore the world. Simply walking around and just talking with characters to find out more about the world can be very enjoyable, and all of this contributes to a feeling of a dynamic world. At the same time, all of the dialog with these characters is fleshed out to a story-like level, rather than the short sentences that you may get in many other games. Conversations with characters, both plot-related and not, read like a full conversation in a good novel.

Thus, going outside the main plot and exploring gives the player the experience of exploring a real world, where there is more going on than the events the player is dealing with. This is important in freeform games; who’s to believe that the whole world revolves around your few characters? On the other hand, when the player does choose to advance the story with the main goals, the story sticks together remarkably well and following this main storyline has an almost book-like quality to it.

The influence of this blending of the two subgenres can be felt in many modern day games. The *Final Fantasy* series, for example, have moved from a predominantly story-driven series to being story-driven, but with a more developed world and more freedom in events. Other games like *Planescape: Torment*, a game based on the strongly statistical D&D engine, would be expected to be freeform but have an exceptionally strong story wrapping the experience. The story in *Planescape: Torment* in particular was so extensive that many traditional freeform RPG players complained about the amount of reading!

Conclusion

An extremely well designed and enjoyable game, *Betrayal at Krondor* showed the kinds of results possible when the usual story-driven and freeform subgenres of RPGs are reunited, with careful attention to the game and world design as well as skillful storytelling and writing.

This marks a refreshing change from games like *The Elder Scrolls: Arena*, which sacrifice any semblance of story for freeform exploration, and from console games which lead you from point A to point B without much flexibility (often seen in the tradition of Japanese designed RPGs like *Parasite Eve*, which stress story over all). Unfortunately, very few subsequent games have blended the two sides as well. Even the sequels to this game, *Betrayal in Antara* and *Return to Krondor*, don't accomplish this as well. Even still, the trend toward this happening is clearly evident, and shows promise for better RPGs in the future.

Credits

Thanks to Games Domain and the *Betrayal at Krondor* Help Web for screenshots.

Other Notes

Just a random side note; the Word Count of the whole document is more than 2000 words, but if you don't count the credits (which are pretty immense), there are about 1800. Hopefully this is OK.