

# It was you all along: Unwittingly playing the villain in OFF

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Role-playing games are often associated with their representation of heroic characters saving the world and stopping wrongdoing, fashioned after the heroic sword and sorcery literary genre. Though a small number of games has attempted to break from this trend by allowing the player to control a villain, they are often marketed and designed with this trait clearly communicated to the player; this paper analyzes the way in which *OFF* explores the concept of controlling a villain character while withholding this information from the player and hiding the clues in plain sight.

*OFF* (Unproductive Fun Time, 2008) is an RPG for PC, in which the player takes control of a character called “the Batter,” whose stated mission is to “purify the world.” It is structured in five zones to explore sequentially: zone 0 acting as a tutorial, and zones 1, 2, 3 and The Room containing the rest of the game.

## 1. Setting up expectations

The first stage the game goes through is setting the player’s expectations to read the Batter as a traditional RPG hero, through paratext, narration, and the interactions that other early-game characters have with the Batter.

Thanks to genre conventions, some of that work precedes the game: as H. Porter Abbott explains, “receiving the story depends on how we in turn construct it from the discourse” (19); we can use the adaptation of Goffman’s work in “frame theory” to understand how the player brings their frame of reference (what they understand an RPG to be like) into their reading of the game (Abbott 26). In many RPGs, the player takes control of a heroic character, who takes on a mission fueled by good intentions. *OFF* relies on the player’s previous experience, taking on similar mechanics and structure in order to guide the player to form these associations.

In analyzing the role of the narrator in this stage, we must look at the extra-diegetic text, of which we identify only four instances in the game: the introduction, the battle interface, the item and ability descriptions, and as part of the dialogue with the Queen.

The most important of these for our purposes is the introduction text. The narration immediately states the importance of the Batter’s mission, and puts the player in charge of it. Doing so reinforces the expectations that the players bring in of being assigned to a heroic mission. By

doing so at the very beginning of the game, it takes advantage of the primacy effect, explained by Abbott as “our tendency to privilege [...] the first impression we developed early in the reading” (81). This effect, also referred to as confirmation bias, will lead the player to pay more attention to elements that confirm the expectation they have set, and gloss over details that contradict it.

Since there is no narration through most of the game, the Batter is mostly presented to us through the eyes of other characters and through his own words. The Batter is curt, and speaks little and seldom, so most of our first impressions of the Batter come from the early-game characters, who have a tendency to base their image of the Batter on assumptions after a cursory first impression (putting them at an interesting parallel with the player, and acting in this sense as player surrogates).

Our first example of this appears with the first character we meet, the Judge, who qualifies the Batter’s mission as a “laudable objective” and sets out to help him. The Elsen (inhabitants of the three zones, meek and anxious), aided by their own assumptions of the Batter, give him a task that seems to fit with his stated mission; and as he starts fighting spectres and referring to them as “impures”, the battle narration confirms this (the banners “Purification in progress...” and “Adversaries purified” at the beginning and end of the battle can be seen as a type of narration, since they are extra-diegetic text). These assessments cement the initial idea of the Batter’s “good” intentions in the mind of the player very early on in the game.

Throughout the rest of the game, the only characters who do not immediately place trust in the Batter are the guardians of the zones (as well as the Queen and Hugo, who already know who he is, but appear too late in the game to influence this aspect). In making their assumptions, the guardians instead place a negative light on the Batter: Dedan takes him for the chief of the spectres and labels him a threat, Japhet immediately tries to battle him, and Enoch reacts aggressively.

However, the game aids the player’s confirmation bias: almost from the moment they are on screen, the guardians are shown to possess some kind of undesirable quality that antagonizes them to the player and subtracts credibility from them. Dedan is harsh and aggressive towards the weak Elsen, Japhet shows a god complex and destructive tendencies. Enoch is different in that he only reacts negatively once the Batter threatens his life, but by the point he is encountered the player is already primed to see the guardians as antagonists. In this manner, these characters who view the Batter negatively are singled out not only as enemies (despite their non-involvement with the ghosts), but as the most important enemies of the game, designated by the Batter as the source of the “impurity” he aims to eliminate, and thus subtracting from their credibility.

## 2. Space before and after the Batter

The environment of the game plants clues all throughout the narrative, informing the player about the Batter almost more than it does about the world itself. It does this in two major ways.

The more subtle of these methods uses the space in conjunction with the characters. The Batter is consistently singled out as odd, weird or abnormal by the other characters (e.g. the Elsen's inability to place him in their worldview, the Judge initially believing him to be a figment of his imagination.) The weirdness of the world is reinforced more and more as it is explored, and yet the Batter is consistently singled out as abnormal.

This juxtaposition works in two opposing directions. Initially, while the player still holds the expectation of the Batter as a "good" RPG hero, the strangeness of the world offsets the strangeness that the characters perceive in the Batter, and it helps overlook it (what Abbott terms "underreading.") However, once the Batter's nature is revealed, the player sees that if even in this strange setting the Batter is seen as abnormal, then it must be because the Batter is more deeply unnatural than everything else in the setting; the strangeness of the setting exacerbates instead of normalizing the Batter's abnormality.

In addition to this, the world of the game changes in direct response to the Batter's actions. It is possible to return to a previous zone once it has been "purified" by defeating the guardian; upon this visit, the zone is completely changed. The color and the NPCs disappear from the environment; the background music changes to indistinct whispers and distant shouting; and the spectre-type enemies that appeared before and that the player is familiar are replaced with the much stronger Secretaries. This signals to the player that the Batter's "purification" mission is not so, and serves as a breaking point for the illusion, as explained in section 3.

## 3. The Batter's character revealed through action

The real character of the Batter, regardless of the initial preconceptions of the player, is displayed throughout the game through his actions: "We cannot see inside character. We must infer." (Abbott, 126)

The first action the Batter takes that hints at his "purification" quest not being the kind of "good" that the player expects of an RPG hero is his immediate targeting of Dedan, marking him as a "spectre", the very entities Dedan is also fighting against, simply because the guardian is, in the Batter's words, "hostile." This first action starts showing the Batter's personality, much more accurately than all of the assumptions that other characters made upon meeting him.

Later, he encounters a Burnt for the first time: a hostile creature, seemingly devoid of control over itself, that Elsen turn into when they become too anxious; their dehumanization allows the player to treat them as any other enemy and "purify" them. The normalization of this allows for the plot to take the next step: the Batter seeks out Dedan, unprovoked, and kills him. The

Batter's words after this battle ("You've been defeated, Dedan, guardian of the first zone. This land is now pure.") insinuate that the Batter's objective was all along to defeat the guardian of the zone, and thus that it is not the spectres that are his primary concern. Zones 2 and 3 follow a similar structure.

All of these revelations are likely to be glossed over, due to the effect of the confirmation bias explained in section 1. Through the player's expectation of adherence to RPG conventions (the presence of a "boss" that must be defeated at the end of each area, enemies as obstacles to overcome), the player is eased into performing more morally dark actions gradually (taking advantage of the "boiling the frog" effect).

Via the gradual ramping up of the Batter's sociopathic actions, the expectations that the player initially conceived of the Batter being an RPG hero slowly become more and more fragile. This initial image of the Batter reaches its breaking point at a time that depends on each player's level of suspension of disbelief. Some of the most likely points for this to happen are when they revisit one of the now purified zones, or upon reaching the last zone of the game (the Room), where the plot reaches its climax. The illusion shatters all at once, leaving the player with the feeling that they should have seen it earlier with how obvious all of the clues were.

## Conclusion

The way that *OFF* explores playing a villain is distinct in the way that it does not announce so; instead it leaves the player to find out the consequences of their actions within the game, using a main character who genuinely considers he is doing right and forcing the player to use the other characters and the environment to build a more appropriate value scale as the game progresses. Through relying on genre tropes to shape the player's initial expectation and leaving the consequences of the player's actions in plain sight to challenge those expectations in a continuous manner, the game eschews the method of a surprise hidden twist, instead allowing the player to discover the morality of their actions and adjust their perception at their own pace.

## Works cited / Ludography

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