

Game Title: Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney
Platform: Nintendo DS (version reviewed here), Game Boy Advance, iPhone, Nintendo Wii
Genre: Adventure
Release Date: October 12, 2005
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Shu Takumi
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Overview

Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney is the story of the rookie defense attorney Phoenix Wright searching for an old friend in the courtroom. His roller coaster court cases take him to his goal; however, when he meets his friend again, he discovers this friend is no longer the person he knew. Despite their status now as enemies, Wright involves himself in a case that digs into the past to find out why his friend's heart has changed.

Characters

Taking into account all five cases available in the game, the cast is large and varied. As a result, only the characters featured prominently in the chief narrative will be described here.

- **Phoenix Wright** is a rookie defense attorney serving as the player's avatar. Wright provides small insights and assistance through self-contained thoughts. When removed from the role as a player, Wright may seem slightly slow and reliant on luck and bluff to win his cases. However, he presents the character of an honest, determined man who believes in his clients' innocence—the kind of man that every person should hope his or her defense lawyer to be.
- **Miles Edgeworth** is a seasoned, undefeated prosecutor, rumored to run backroom deals and tamper with evidence to obtain victory and maintain his 'undefeated' prestige. In court, he is oppressive, undermining Wright's progress with shady testimony and subversive tactics. Dressed impeccably with a necktie of aristocratic ruffles, Edgeworth is the image of a composed, competent man, albeit with a distorted vision of justice.
- **Mia Fey** is Wright's mentor, a successful and apparently well-liked defense lawyer before her death. As a descendant of a family of spirit mediums, she discards her familial duties to pursue the truth behind her mother's disappearance fifteen years ago. Mia briefly possesses her sister on occasion to assist Wright in tight spots in court.
- **Maya Fey** is the younger sister of Mia Fey; by default she becomes the heir of the Fey clan after her sister leaves. A spirit medium in training, Maya meets Wright on the night of her sister's murder, becoming Wright's client after she is accused of the murder. Her goal is to become a full-fledged spirit medium, but runs into roadblocks during her ventures with Wright. Eccentric and cheerful, Maya plays the optimistic sidekick, providing a second perspective, sometimes comic relief.
- **Richard "Dick" Gumshoe** is a detective. Notably, his nickname results in a heavily redundant name as a character (Detective Dick Gumshoe). He is as his name says. Despite working with the prosecution on

every case, Gumshoe blunders often and drops plenty of classified information for Wright. Gumshoe is scruffy and bumbling, but overall remains well-intended if daft.

- **Manfred Von Karma** is an aged, dignified prosecutor with an undefeated victory record; for his whole career he has received only a single penalty point. "Just picture a prosecutor as vicious as me," Edgeworth informs Wright, "Multiplied by a factor of ten." Von Karma's goals are hidden but slowly unveiled in relation to the unsolved case of fifteen years ago. He is Wright's opponent for Edgeworth's case.

Breakdown

PW presents its narrative in a manner similar to television drama: the game is structured around separate court cases, and each case is akin to an individual, self-contained episode. Recurring characters develop as the overarching narrative progresses. Gradually the cases become longer and more complex, and culminate in a single case that encompasses all of the chief characters and the main character's goals.

The 'pilot' is "The First Turnabout": the story begins with Phoenix Wright coming fresh off the bar exam into his first court case. Larry Butz, Wright's friend, is accused of murdering his girlfriend Cindy Stone. With minor assistance from his mentor Mia Fey, Wright manages to obtain a Not Guilty verdict for Butz—and find the true culprit in the process.

"The First Turnabout" acts as an introduction to the main character and some recurring characters. Takumi, the game writer, rightfully starts the game in the courtroom phase rather than the investigative phase of the game: the former is more exciting than the latter, and hooks the player into the story before easing the player into the slower, less exciting portions of the narrative.

The strongest pull of the first case involves PW: AA's chief theme: injustice. Injustice continually surfaces throughout the story when the odds are stacked in favor of the prosecution despite Wright's knowledge of facts. "The First Turnabout" sparks injustice with Frank Sahwit, the witness claiming he saw Butz kill the victim. Sahwit, portrayed with a yes-man face and oily mannerisms, is in the opening sequence as the murderer plotting who to blame for his crime. The player faces him in court knowing he is a liar before he speaks; Sahwit affirms this image by lying. Yet, the law of court in the game world is proof. Wright can only win the trial by presenting evidence plausible enough to cover all of the circumstances despite knowing the truth. Designed to align the player with the underdog, and stoke the feeling of injustice, the narrative prompts taking action to right wrongs.

The first case ends on a positive note, with Mia Fey taking Wright and Butz out for celebratory drinks. The second case opens with Mia's murder.

In "Turnabout Sisters", Wright's arrival at the crime scene introduces the investigation phase. No other case places Wright as one of the immediate people on the scene; introducing investigation through a location familiar to Wright, and concerning a victim Wright knows, slides the player into the slower paced, often tedious play with sufficient narrative motivation.

Outside of character design, animation, and dialogue, the narrative has characterization through location. Wright examines set locations while he investigates; while Wright has internal dialogue regarding his opinion of the objects scrutinized, the player can also gain impressions of characters associated with a location through a location. Something can certainly be concluded about the man who has a gold desk with headless, nude men as its leg supports, or the man who has expensive everything in his law office but is not present in his office himself.

With Mia Fey's office, Wright fleshes out her character more with his memories and imagination involving the objects present in the office. "There's a horrendous amount of legal books here," Wright notes while examining the bookcase. "Scariest still is that Mia probably read all of these."

Maya Fey, Mia's sister, is accused of Mia's murder. Wright takes her case and meets the Demon Prosecutor Miles Edgeworth as adversaries in court. Despite Edgeworth's machinations and being accused of the murder himself, Wright wins the case with the assistance of Mia, who possesses Maya and gives Wright vital evidence.

The narrative structure uses the in-game "three-day trial" system: trials are limited to three days, and a verdict must be reached on the third day. Cases can stretch for longer than one investigative phase and one courtroom phase; this structure permits better development of cases and characters while pacing narrative exposition and action. Investigation builds suspense, brought to climax in the courtroom. Motivations often remain hidden until the culprit is confronted, so suspense continues to build up to the verdict, making the trials roller coasters until the end. In "Turnabout Sisters", Wright actually fails to present the necessary evidence to win the case—at the last minute Mia Fey pressures the culprit to admit his guilt instead.

The narrative takes a particular and careful approach of encapsulating virtues and vices both in the opponents Wright faces and in the allies he deals with, creating balanced personalities on both sides. Even for the portions depicted in a black-white fashion, an equal amount of ambiguity flows around many characters, masking their truths with intentions that may not pan out cleanly to good or evil. The moral uncertainties found within the story and characters engage the player on an affective level, keeping the player guessing at character motivations while pulling the player into these characters' stories. Edgeworth is the best example: the player first meets him as an enemy, but learns about his reasons and eventually comes to defend him as a defense lawyer. Despite Edgeworth's status as the opposition, the philosophy behind his actions is something relatable to the experience the player has with the courtroom: "There's no way to tell who is guilty and who is innocent! All I can hope is to get every defendant declared guilty!"

The game requires a good deal of legal suspension of disbelief. The court is a heavily simplified representation of the real deal. However, the absurd appearance of many characters and the infusion of puns and humor into dialogue color the narrative closer to comedy rather than drama. By infusing the seriousness of situations with light-hearted comedy, the story mitigates much of the criticism it would otherwise receive for plot-holes or illogical progression. While the story tackles serious issues (the unfair justice system, murder, blackmail), it handles these issues in moderation. However, the narrative favors what we as people would consider 'right'. Mia Fey taking possession of her sister in order to return to court and expose her murderer is an example of how the story metes out justice despite death.

Turnabout Samurai, the third case, features little advancement in the overall story and is considered a 'filler case'. The chief narrative advancement made in the third case comes on the last day of the trial, when Edgeworth decides to discard both his goal to charge the defendant Guilty and his desire to win. He chooses to side with Wright and the truth instead. In spite of their teamwork, at the conclusion of the trial, Edgeworth tells Wright that he never wants to see Wright again.

Case four, "Turnabout Goodbyes", opens with a sequence showing two men at a lake and the sound of a gunshot. The sequence ends with an image of Edgeworth holding a gun. The murder Edgeworth is accused of turns out to be a scheme for revenge by the man accused of killing his father fifteen years ago in the DL-6 case, the same case after which Misty Fey disappeared. In court, after Wright absolves Edgeworth of the crime for this case, the

prosecutor admits his guilt to the unsolved DL-6 case: he believes he killed his father. Despite Von Karma's obstructions and Edgeworth's confession, Wright plows on in search of the truth.

What ultimately makes the game narrative ingenious in its design is how well it integrates with the game mechanics. In order to obtain a Not Guilty verdict, Wright must find the truth. Naturally, the story flows in the direction of truth, but in order to secure the innocence of the defendant, the in-game justice system observes nothing except evidence. Edgeworth and Von Karma both mock Wright for the defense lawyer's bluffs and conjectures without proof, with Von Karma in particular outright forcefully seizing the necessary evidence outside of court. Yet, in the final case, Wright defeats Von Karma within the rules of the game—using the most oddly pointless piece of evidence until the moment Wright needs it. The satisfaction is as deafening as the roar Von Karma makes when he loses, at last, a case in his career.

Strongest Element

Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney is a game that brings together all of its elements in a remarkably fulfilling and well-done manner; everything from gameplay to music and sound effects support the narrative, which by itself is a foundation solid enough to make these constituents work. Above all else, what makes the narrative successful is the half-rivalry, half-camaraderie between Wright and Edgeworth. Without an opponent of interest dominating and providing substance to the prosecution, the narrative would have likely fallen into the pit trap of clear black-white distinctions. The rivalry adds to player motivations and offers a strong, well-developed antagonist, culminating into a case where the player may actually want to defend Edgeworth.

Unsuccessful Element

The most unsuccessful part of PW:AA is the inclusion of false decisions. Often the game presents choices that arbitrarily redirect towards the same outcomes, with only a slight variation in dialogue. When Wright visits Maya while she is in detention, he is given three options to respond to her inquiry about becoming her defense attorney; yet all answers end with her accusation of his distrust. The choices briefly present amusing situations, but the lack of any true effect is a speed bump in the immersion. While the narrative is strong because of the linear structure, choices should have a more significant influence because, ultimately, PW: AA is a game.

Highlight

The highlight of the game is the roar of Manfred Von Karma when Wright corners him completely, using the evidence and advice Von Karma supplied. The ultimate irony of the case is that it is entirely Von Karma's machinations for revenge. His desire to play the case out in court leads to his downfall. Von Karma's breakdown is the ultimate victory for the player: the player has used what the game taught him and looked carefully at all dialogue and story clues to defeat an undefeated veteran. The narrative plays out the fifteen years of revenge so carefully plotted that Von Karma earns respect for his ingenuity to the player. Although in subsequent *Ace Attorney* games he does not appear again, Von Karma leaves a powerful last image: he accepts his loss gracefully, showing not only moral victory over a criminal but the tragic defeat of a powerful man.

Critical Reception

PW: AA received an 8/10 from Eurogamer, and an 8.8/10 from Gamespot at the time it released on DS in 2005. Metacritic shows over 50 reviews, with only one ranking it 50/100 and all remaining scores ranging from 70 to 100. Both Eurogamer and Gamespot lauded the charm and engrossing story of the game, while also lamenting at its linearity and false decisions. Even the 50 review praised the story and rated the game for its defects as a game and not for its narrative.

As an adventure game, PW: AA is heavily reliant on a great story to deliver its experience; in the opinion of the reviews mentioned above, it delivers.

Lessons

PW: AA used every aspect of the game to develop its characters: physical appearance, animation, sound effects, musical themes, backdrops, dialogue, and even evidence. While much of the characters' backgrounds are learned through dialogue, the player also forms his own opinions through how they look, speak, and act. The careful thought placed into every element above to flesh out characters is something that could work well in other games. A good example comes from Phoenix Wright: the now-iconic image of Wright standing tall, pointing his finger and shouting "Objection!" is the image of a man boldly out to discern the truth. It is presented often enough within the game to affix to Wright the status of 'right', leaving a permanent impression of justice on the player.

The focus on narrative allowed the developers to conceive of gameplay tightly knit with the story. Presently, most games keep story and gameplay separate, and fail to capitalize on player feelings. Speaking to others, presenting evidence to enact information and to counter lies, and carefully thinking out witness testimony are elements married to narrative in their execution. They strengthen player motivation and make the gameplay less of a chore for the player who pursues the narrative.

Wright finds out much about the characters and events he investigates by examining the world and the objects in it. When examining Grossberg's office, Wright notes that everything is expensive; the player can thus assume Grossberg is a successful, rich lawyer. Games heavy on story nowadays trend towards having a menu option filled with walls of text on lore; those games could look to PW:AA for examples on how to provide world background in a more interesting, dynamic way that lets the player draw his own conclusions. This would be, "show by telling in an interesting manner".

Summation

Despite the absurdity of how it presents the courtroom, and the lunatic characters populating the narrative, *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* excels at storytelling. While point-and-click adventure games are nothing new, PW:AA's approach in the courtroom setting provide an interesting break and alternative from the action-oriented games of today. Above all else, *Ace Attorney* is a well-paced adventure balanced, relatable and thought-provoking issues, and executes them with all comedy and seriousness. If there is ever a game to recommend based on story, this game is it.