



# Yesterday Origins REVIEW

## The Good:

Interesting origin story; sincere attempt to close the series in a full circle; lots of inventory-based quests; superlative art and animation; sleek editing; good soundtrack; well-rounded antagonist.

## The Bad:

Clichéd and disjointed modern-day plot distracts from the medieval storyline; inefficient cursor-hotspot interactivity; a host of forgettable side characters; blah John and snotty Pauline's domestic drama.

## Our Verdict:

A disappointing present-day storyline infringes upon the dark historical tale of *Yesterday Origins*, but outstanding production quality, nonstop quests, and a few spirited acts go a long way towards saving the day.



3.5 stars out of 5

Scoring System - Editorial Policies

Written by **Shuva Raha** — January 20, 2017

*Send not to know  
For whom the bell tolls,  
It tolls for thee.*

John Donne's eerie lines crept into my mind as the bells of Villar de Fuentenegara rang forlornly in the lengthening shadows of twilight while villagers rushed to shutter their windows as the latest prey of the Spanish Inquisition was dragged over the cobblestoned lanes. A few step out to pelt stones at the captive, causing his hideous antlered, crow-beaked mask to fall off, revealing young Miguel, the son of the Duke. Condemned for his proficiency with

languages and ambidexterity, Miguel is branded the Devil's Son and incarcerated in a gory torture chamber with a pig that has been deemed blasphemous for gnawing upon a priest. While Fuentenegara is fictitious, the excesses of the Inquisition are not, and this grim prologue sets the tone for *Yesterday Origins*, the follow-up to Pendulo Studios' 2012 release *Yesterday*.

Part prequel, part sequel, *Origins* merges the medieval with the modern as it traces the five-century-old roots of immortal protagonist John Yesterday while he goes about his now-humdrum life in Paris with girlfriend Pauline and their antiques store. It's a visually gripping game, sketched on an expansive and expertly illustrated canvas lush with colours and artistic whimsy, but the underlying viciousness of the story punches through with edgy comics-style paneling and hyper-stylised cutscenes. While John leads the show, you also play several segments as his past personas Miguel and Yago, as well as Pauline. Progress is fueled by inventory puzzles, occasionally amped up with the challenge to work out the rationale first, or by segments of tandem play between John and Pauline. Playing time can stretch to eight-odd hours depending on how quickly you solve the more twisted quests. Overall the game mechanics closely mirror the original's minimalistic format, allowing you to play with a controller (suggested by the game) or a mouse, which makes inspecting objects clunky and is worsened by a dodgy cursor-hotspot combo. John exists in a twilight zone where misplaced memories constantly infringe upon his reality, and these abrupt time jumps add much-needed bite to an otherwise clichéd and somewhat disjointed present-day baddie-wants-superpowers plot. *Yesterday Origins* lacks the intricate narrative and macabre awesomeness of its predecessor, but is nevertheless a solid adventure and recommended for series fans.

Of the two parallel storylines, the brilliant but defiant Miguel's displacement from posh nobility to the monastic, punishing world of the satanic Order of The Flesh is far more interesting than ultra-bland John's blah relationship with snotty Pauline and their unexciting sale of a Japanese antique to a cantankerous billionaire. Burning with youthful impatience, Miguel constantly challenges the authority of his adoptive guardian and mentor, Ginés de Orduna, then only a senior monk at the abbey of Santa Brigida, and it is fantastic to watch the wily, decisively dangerous older man temper his reactions to keep his ward tethered yet inspired as they seek the incredible, damning knowledge of immortality. Though perverse, the purity of their purpose balances their complex personas, and keeps them from being caricature villains. Their petty plays for one-upmanship, disputes on how cruel is *too* cruel, and their malevolent yet abiding bond forged by common cause form the crux of the past-lives plot.

John, however, is a shadow of his former self. In the three-odd years since his employment with sinister philanthropist Henry White imprinted the scars of the past on him, he has moved in with Pauline and lasered the 'Y' off his palm in a desperate bid for normalcy. But the nightmares still haunt him, and every night, in *Memento*-esque style, he mails himself a selfie video of his saga, *just in case* he wakes up once more without his memories. Pauline and John are struggling to rebuild her deceased father's debt-ridden antiques business, and much time is spent managing the nitty-gritties of office work. The link between their latest buyer, whom John takes great pains to convince, and one of his sworn adversaries is tenuous at best, and a simplistic exposition does little to redeem the contrived reconnection of John and the Order of the Flesh.

The strength of the series lies in reconstructing the past from John's fragmented recollections. Sixteenth century Spain is rife with superstition and politics, a fertile land to nurture one's imagination. It's also the perfect foundation for *Yesterday*'s troubled 500-year history, its devastating events dooming him to centuries of inevitable, incomplete reincarnations. *Origins* tries to weave the threads of his past into his here-and-now, and raises some important questions about his future: what if he has only a limited number of reincarnations, and with each death is creeping towards the final one? Is immortality worth it, if all that you love perishes while you persist – or worse, if you arise from death with no memory of the life you had been living? But instead of dovetailing the chequered lives of *Yesterday* into the man he is today, the game squanders time and energy to create a parallel track of insipid art crime that is forgettable by itself but unforgivable in the context of wasted opportunity. It is rare to get a protagonist who can justifiably be given *any* identity and personality across centuries and nations; to sidestep that and instead invest in passing nobodies is the biggest misstep of *Yesterday Origins*.

The gameplay is very similar to the original in form and function. The minimalist interface reveals the inventory, hotspot key and settings on rolling over the top and bottom edges, freeing up the entire screen for exploration. The game recommends playing with a controller, as the mouse warrants dexterity with various combinations of clicks, holds, drags and zooms with the left button. Onscreen hotspots are unduly difficult to find due to the white crosshair cursor, which takes a fraction of a moment too long to activate (you may sweep over the area without a reaction if you move too fast), and then pulses so faintly that you may not even notice the change. Interactive objects and people are inspected up close in full 3D, which is laborious with the mouse and without meticulous attention can lead to missed spots. Collected items are mostly everyday sorts with predictable usage, but some quests require the rationale to be established through mini-puzzles linking conversations and observations first. As before, mixing-and-matching items is simplified by disallowing absurd pairings while acknowledging reasonable but incorrect matches. Completed hotspots are deactivated, but used items persist in the inventory till the end of each chapter.

The numerous inventory-based objectives move the storyline along. While most are just the right amount of challenging in the offbeat adventure-gamey way, some are too convoluted even in hindsight. Cases in point include jumping through hoops to gather a dozen or so items to create an indoor harpoon to retrieve an everyday object; the tiresome business of infiltrating a houseboat and disarming a couple of thugs; and one of the most outrageous quests I've ever encountered: devising a mind-blowing anti-ageing solution. While you stumble over logical hurdles and sneaky hotspots, the game helpfully steers you ahead with strictly linear progress and limited interactive elements per scene. You play as both John (or his past avatars) and Pauline, and there are some interesting sequences of tandem play between them, where you swap between the two to exchange ideas and items. As before, the game auto-saves at key checkpoints. You can create multiple games, but within each there is only one save point to resume from.

The six chapters intertwine over four dozen scenes. Starting from the provincial town of Fuentenegara, the story flits between locations as diverse as the ominous abbey of Santa Brigida perched on a rocky crag above a restless grey sea; the sun-dappled seat of Hans Christian Andersen in New York's Central Park; the beautiful but desecrated church of The Order of the Flesh with its arched wooden beams, dainty stained glass windows and medieval torture devices; lavish Spanish castles and British manors; and the murky, dank catacombs snaking beneath Paris. Many of the present-day places are force-fitted into the plot for scenic variety, but the gorgeous art and striking perspectives make meandering through them enjoyable anyway. Every scene bears the hallmark of Pendulo's artistic excellence and revives the sleek styling of *Yesterday*, with vibrant and artsy compositions, graphic novel-style paneling for insets and conversations, white speech bubbles with bold black text, and numerous high-octane cinematics.

Though three-dimensional and fully animated, the characters blend in smoothly with the hand-painted backgrounds. Most movements are fluid and realistic, including interactions with inventory objects, onscreen elements, and other people. Lip sync works better in close-ups than in the far shots, and characters emote extensively to enhance their dialogues with non-verbal cues. There are many brilliant in-game animations, like a *Pulp Fiction*-style fight scene; an eagle swooping off a mountain top onto John's wrist; Pauline sneaking about a shady houseboat in fairy-lit Amsterdam; John cautiously crossing a chasm, foot over foot, and thrashing about when blindfolded and gagged. Progress is frequently punctuated with cutscenes, and the sheer abundance of animation gives the game a lively feel. Thoughtful lighting sets the mood for each scene, as flaming torches cast wavering shadows on cold stone corridors, and city lights seep into John's hotel room late in the evening. Intricate detailing of background elements like picture frames, cornices, carpets and engravings, and subtleties like distortion through glass, are constant visual treats.

This attention to detail is carried into the lengthy conversations, which are loaded with historical data, tons of exposition, subtle clues, and reams of chit-chat. Each dialogue set comprises many preset questions and comments, often branching into sub-topics or posing choices, though there are no consequences of wrong answers. In some cases, selections must be made in a certain order, deduced by trial and error, to yield the required response. The script is well written and adapted to the linguistic traits of the various eras, in choice of words as well as style of speaking. The colloquial dialogues are peppered with expletives and throw in some clever one-liners, but with the watered-down storyline and dull cast, the overall outcome is neither as edgy nor as witty as the original.

Speaking of the cast, the unlikely star is Ginés de Orduna, who, despite a regrettably truncated role, shines as a layered antagonist. He's educated, practical, and fiercely protective of his ward. While he steadfastly drives his invaluable asset to fulfil his Machiavellian plans, he also nurtures the young boy, almost paternally, to be a leader in the scheme of things. Miguel does well to hold his own against assorted adversaries, ranging from enraged hogs to crafty colleagues, and shares a cautiously respectful bond with his mentor. His doppelgänger John is devoid of his fiery spirit, however, and leads a life as grey as his sweaters and coats. Domesticated by the bossy Pauline, the incompatible couple bickers on about their pals and priorities, and at one point she sullenly wonders if it was only the associated danger that had attracted her to 'dull and boring' John.

Crazy Boris returns to a meaty role as John's bestie, and a couple of Pauline's erstwhile hacker pals pitch in with convenient cameos. The rest of the cast is new and underwhelming: one-track villains Victoria Baxter and her power-dressed henchwoman Amanda; two smart-assy criminals; a much-hyped but blink-and-you-miss-her redhead from John's past, and an assortment of monks and meddlers. Of these, only the sceptic jailer of the Inquisition and impenitent self-preserved Brother Botillo do justice to their roles; other side-plots and characters are randomly inserted and merely impede the pace at crucial junctures.

The voice acting veers between excellent and awful. Youthful Miguel bristles with just the right amount of impudence, while John is quiet and reserved; Victoria is on the mark with her blow-hot-and-cold businesswoman shtick; the ogre-like jailer surprises with his erudite baritone, and preppy contract killers Julius and Markus do well with their irrelevant but voluminous banter. Ginés again steals the show with his understated brilliance, be it his measured mentoring or vicious snaps, and is a delight across the ages. On the dismal side are irrepressible ham-sters Boris, with his absurd accent, and art thief Weasel, with her 'mega' awful dialogue delivery. Pauline has a nice voice, but still lacks any hint of her French origin in diction.

The music of *Origins* is chosen to complement the disparate times and locations, spanning dramatic, traditional orchestration in middle-era Spain; up-tempo jazz in present-day Paris, and hip electronica in Amsterdam. The tracks loop with lengthy interim gaps filled by ambient noise like crackling fires, dripping water, shrieking snowstorms and footsteps, layered with distant screams and ghostly whispers in ancient churches and abandoned catacombs, and the bustle of everyday life and traffic in cities. A lilting melody plays hide-and-seek with John's memories and in a rare moment of quiet solitude, he plays it back on a piano; also haunting are the deep choral hymns echoing through the hallways of Santa Brigida.

*Yesterday Origins* wins big in terms of production quality, with fantastic art and animation, a truckload of stylish cinematics, sleek editing, a strong soundtrack, and at least some great voice-overs. The gameplay, however, is more of a mixed bag: it suffers from issues like the dim delayed-response cursor, and playing with a mouse makes the 3D interactivity significantly more tedious, but on the flip side it can be commended for the streamlined interface and tandem play. The inventory-based puzzles, while well-integrated into the plot, can be convoluted at times, but part of that is the nature of the genre, and part of it seems intentional to hike up the degree of challenge.

But while the game stays on the path mapped by its predecessor for the most part, it slips precisely where *Yesterday* scored big – on the narrative. *Origins* starts strong against the backdrop of the Inquisition, returning to John's chilling past to trace how his curse began. But instead of exploring five centuries of intrigue and evil by delving into more of John's 'afterlives', the game creates a parallel track of present-day mayhem to tie up loose ends and bites off more than it can chew. Meanwhile, the art sale plot is dreary and disjointed, crowded with forgettable characters who soak up precious screen time. John and Pauline have zero chemistry and seem to bring out the worst in each other; Ginés and Miguel are the true core of this show. Opting for a more caper-ish vibe dilutes the darkness, and instead we get a vanilla version of the unapologetically disturbing *Yesterday*. That said, though the sequel doesn't measure up to the standards of its predecessor, for those willing to take the bad with the good, it is still sleek and eminently playable if you have some time to kill.