

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: The Cave

Platform: Microsoft Windows / Mac OS X / Linux / Wii U / Playstation 3 / Xbox 360

Genre: Puzzle Platformer

Release Date: January 2013

Developer: Double Fine Productions

Publisher: Sega

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Ron Gilbert

Overview

“It's a story of seven people, and a glimpse into their dark hearts”.*

The Cave tells the tale of the selfish, irresponsible, and egotistical. Seven individuals with illusions of grandeur enter an anthropomorphic cave, who talks by way of narration, in hopes of reaping the benefits of their manic fantasies. As you progress through it's constantly shifting labyrinth the adventurers relive the most haunting and telling moments of their lives. All the while The Cave, seemingly prescient, dishes out dark readings of their future.

The Cave portrays the antihero in gaming in a much different light than a player is accustomed to. Beyond the genre swap, antiheroes stay out of puzzle games and stick to FPS's, there are no tangible moments of change towards good will. None of these characters are good men willing to do bad things, they're just bad men.

Characters

Although each character has an interesting story of their own, they repeatedly hit the same story notes. In some ways this is closer to a series of short stories than a full length novel, so I'd like to focus on just a few of them.

- **The Cave** – A soothsaying, hyper-intellectual formation of rocks. Not only is he the landscape on which the game takes place, but possibly the darkest character in the game. Not only does he seem to have full knowledge of the player character's futility, but his promise at the beginning of the game, “You will find what you seek inside me”, is closer to a Faustian bargain than a gift. He not only encourages their self-destructive actions, but takes a great amount of delight in

watching them unfold.

- **The Knight** – A skittish peasant boy in knight's armor, he enters the cave lusting for power. With callous regard for the safety of the kingdom, The Knight lets loose a dragon, murders a princess, and tricks an old king to pull Excalibur from its stone.
- **The Twins** – Grounded for multiple attempts of patricide and matricide, The Twins want nothing more than to escape their Victorian home. Supporting the stereotype that all twins are mechanical and vicious, the twins search for a carton of rat poison to slip into their parents' stew.
- **The Hilbilly** – A simple carny worker who falls in love with “the two legged woman”. When she takes a liking to the “normally strong man”, The Hilbilly snaps and burns the place to the ground.
- **The Time Traveler** – She's an employee at a future museum that has hilariously gotten most of history dead wrong. Jealous of “The Best Employee of All Time”, this chrono-adventurer travels in between past, present, and future to wipe out his entire family tree.
- **The Adventurer** – A globe-trotting tomb raider who's ransacked a plethora of ancient grave sites for fame and fortune. While thieving a pyramid, she uses a fellow adventurer as a meat-bridge to cross a chasm of spikes.

Breakdown

In the opening sequence the Cave explains the basic motivations of these seven characters, purposefully omitting their more disreputable intentions. The player chooses three of these seven and enters the cave to help fulfill their wishes.

The first mission given to you is by a conniving gift shop clerk who won't open the Cave tour until he has three trinkets to sell. On multiple play throughs, the player discovers that the monkey paw-esque gift given to your last three adventurers are the trinkets the following three find. Even the gift shop clerk, an infinitesimally minor character, is a cheater, liar, and a crook.

Then the personal adventure begins. Depending on the characters chosen, certain parts of the Cave can be accessed using their personal power: invulnerability for The Knight, ghosting for The Twins, or teleportation for The Time Traveler. In a normal adventure the player would experience three stories, so the three characters chosen here are The Twins, The Knight, and The Hilbilly.

The Knight is the first part of the Cave that can be accessed, and it sets the tone immediately. Although his power is invulnerability, and angel wings rise from his back when used, his wait animation is skittish and he runs with his feet clapping along, more comedic than heroic. His quest to find Excalibur leads him to win the princess' heart by stealing a medallion from a dragon. His tunnel-vision on the quest however lets the dragon free, and in turn, the dragon murders every soul he can find. The Knight returns, takes Excalibur, and runs to the next part of the Cave.

The Hilbilly is the left hook of the game. He arrives at a carnival and tricks tricksters into getting five tickets so that he can get a large pink bear for the “two legged woman”. Although he does commit foul deeds to get his way, he doesn't harm innocents like The Knight does. His turning point however is when he returns to his crush with the bear in hand, only to find that the “normally strong man” has swooped in. The Hilbilly physically cannot leave this area at this point, and a large bale of hay is in front of him. There's a torch nearby. The Cave eggs you on, and the only exit is to burn the whole Carnival to the ground. Then it's on to the next part of the Cave.

The Twins are probably the most terrifying player characters The Cave has to offer. When entering their part of the Cave, The Twins get locked inside their own house, their father guarding the door. So begins a number of odd explorations of the house to find a key to the basement, where the rat poison is. In stride with the rest of the game, The Twins remorselessly poison their parents and run out the front door.

Finally before these three player characters exit the Cave, they're handed their items (Excalibur

for The Knight, pink teddy bear for The Hilbilly, and rat poison for The Twins) and they walk up an extremely long ladder. Another important element to the story are the still art panels that you discover as glowing glyphs on the walls in the cave. After climbing the ladder, all of these panels are revealed and the true endings are as well. The Knight is killed by the dragon, The Hilbilly goes on a pyromaniac spree across the United States, and The Twins are forced to eat their rat poison soup with their parents.

Although the dark comedy of the game cuts the edge off these character's abhorrent actions, it was gratifying as a player to witness these righteous endings.

Strongest Element

In terms of narrative, the hidden glyphs were immensely satisfying. Not only did it provide valuable help for the puzzles in the later parts of the game, you can discover where to put the rat poison if you collect all the glyphs in time for The Twins level, but they were charming as well. It also helps the player to understand these mysterious characters, and in the case of the Hilbilly, garner actual sympathy. Finally, it spaces out these shorter narratives, and because they are collected all throughout the Cave, it gets players thinking about what the next level could possibly look like.

Unsuccessful Element

The most unsuccessful element the game offers are the three mini-quests that break up the personal character journeys. From a mechanic standpoint, the game is meant to be played several times, and after you've solved these three puzzles once it's more methodical and less intelligent. The player remembers how to solve the crate puzzle, and they know exactly what to do with the box of crackers: feed it to the parrot.

Highlight

The most outrageous highlight the game has to offer is during the Time Traveler's section of the Cave. The player has to beat the game once to access her as a character, and for a good reason. The puzzle takes place in three different timelines: past, present, and future. In order to solve some of the puzzles, you have to leave one character in the past holding up a boulder, and have the other character go to the present and witness a skeleton pressed up against it a thousand years later. The most beautiful moment comes at the climax. After interacting with the museum's absurd displays out of sheer thrashing, you convince your nemesis' stone age ancestor to run towards a wheel, something he's been unable to make, and proceed to kiss it. He's directly underneath a ledge, and gloating about how he's going to patent it. You then go to his prototype wheel, a stone triangle, and push it off a ledge onto him. Your future nemesis is dead. Puzzle solved.

Critical Reception

As far as critical reception goes, it seemed rather lackluster. Destructoid gave The Cave a 7.5/10, focusing mostly on how the controls were a bit gummy. Admittedly, the jumping in the game is rather imprecise and therefore grabbing onto ledges is a lot less forgiving, but the game got really buggy for the critics when characters started to penetrate the environments. They also went on to comment how The Hilbilly seems to be an outlier character, committing ill will as a direct result of rejection.

Kotaku's review is more simple, simply giving it a "YES" you should play this game. They also mentioned a few of the glitches Destructoid talked about, but made special notes of the excellent voice acting and "the symbiotic nature of it all". This of course is referring to the theme of sinister people doing sinister actions only to receive sinister punishment.

Finally, GiantBomb gave it 3/5 stars, bringing up that sometimes the Cave's jokes fall flat. He

also brings up that due to the odd number of characters, the game doesn't encourage a third play through.

Lessons

- Characters don't have to be likable, they just have to be consistent within the game's narrative design.
- Foreshadow can be a useful tool to generate excitement in the player. Whether it's hidden glyphs that give players a peek at future levels, or simply a condescending narrator, limiting information over the game's length is crucial.
- A game that encourages repeated play throughs should do its best to make each run completely different than the last. Solving the same puzzles can be a hassle when you already know the answer.

Summation

Overall, The Cave was reviewed poorly because of glitches in the game interrupting the user experience, and some of mechanics causing the player to backtrack. It's a shame that most people will forget this game after its initial conception, because what sells it is the remarkably dark stories. However, it seems that the reason the game had any following in the first place was due to its narrative, and that's the main reason I chose this as my report. It's a game that rewards the player by telling them more about itself. It's an infinite loop, and some critics have even gone on to explain that matching different characters together creates a player generated story. In the end, the player is begging for more tales of woe, and I'm right there with them.

Sources

1. Giant Bomb - <http://www.giantbomb.com/the-cave/61-38390/reviews/>
2. Kotaku - <http://kotaku.com/5977478/the-cave-the-kotaku-review>
3. Destructoid - <http://www.destructoid.com/review-the-cave-242819.phtml>

*The Cave Opening Sequence