

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Wolfenstein: The New Order

Platform: Microsoft Windows, Xbox One, Playstation 4

Genre: First Person Shooter

Release Date: May 20th, 2014

Developer: MachineGames

Publisher: Bethesda Softworks

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Jens Matthies, Tommy Tordsson Bjork

Overview

The New Order is the most recent game in the long-running *Wolfenstein* series. The games follow the commando exploits of Captain William “BJ” Blazkowitz, as he singlehandedly wages war against the occult agents of the Third Reich. While previous games took place during a fictionalized World War II, *The New Order* moves the timeline forward to 1960. BJ has spent 13 years in a state of catatonia following a failed raid on the compound of General Death’s Head, a high-ranking Nazi scientist, and reawakens to find the Nazis have ultimately won the war and taken over the world. BJ takes up arms to try and form a new resistance, while also trying to cope with the sad realities of the new world.

Characters

- **William Joseph “B.J.” Blazkowitz** – Seasoned veteran and hero of the story. BJ leads his comrades from the front and has fought the Nazis for years. BJ takes his mission to kill General Death’s Head extremely personally, and sometimes talks to himself as though addressing the General directly. Generally stolid, BJ nonetheless reveals emotional turmoil over his life at war.
- **General Wilhelm “Death’s Head” Strasse** – The foremost Nazi scientist and mastermind of the Nazi world takeover. Death’s Head is a remorseless psychopath, and baffled as to why BJ opposes what he refers to as “the greatest accomplishment in human history”.
- **Anya Oliwa** – One of the medical staff at the Polish asylum BJ is consigned to at the game’s outset. Anya cares for BJ over 13 years, until the asylum is shut down and the occupants executed. She escapes with BJ joins the Resistance. Before the game’s main storyline, Anya led a double life, brutally killing many soldiers and police in secret.

- **Set Roth** – An elderly Jew and former scientist. Set is broken out of a concentration camp by BJ to help the Resistance. Even while interned at the camp, Set finds ways to undermine the Nazi efforts at world domination, and later supplies the Resistance with powerful technology.
- **Klaus Kreutz** – A former Wehrmacht soldier that has defected and joined the Resistance. He still bears his swastika tattoo, and looks forward to removing it once the fight is won. Klaus takes care of Max, a mentally handicapped man he found on the streets, and has a short attitude towards BJ's disruptive tendencies.
- **J** – An African-American guitarist and pacifist who lives at the Resistance hideout. He wears a mask to hide the scarring he suffered during the atomic attacks on the United States. While he supports the Resistance efforts from the hideout, he looks down on the use of violence by BJ. His characteristics and design suggest that he is actually famed guitarist Jimi Hendrix.

Breakdown

Wolfenstein 3D was the original first person shooter. It laid down a sacred rule: Shoot first, and ask questions later. Eschewing story, *Wolfenstein 3D* concerned itself with gunning down enemies, and to this end used an enemy that few question the morality of gunning down: Nazi soldiers. Most action games since then have followed *Wolfenstein*'s lead, designing enemy forces to be caricatures of evil and not examining them further, sometimes to a fault. The lazy demonization of enemy characters is a common critique of the modern action game. The great success of *The New Order* is that it both shoots *and* asks questions.

In the beginning, *The New Order* treads old ground. The prologue shows us the traditional World War II battlefield scene. Trenches, pillboxes, and steel-helmeted goons abound. But once the prologue is over, it gets much more serious. The anti-fascist message of *The New Order* would not be nearly as meaningful if its villains were not so plausibly written. More than almost any World War II game, *The New Order* is not afraid to show exactly why the Nazis were such a danger to the world. The setpiece moments of the game draw attention to the real ideology of the Nazi Party, from the execution of 'undesirables', to mass internment in concentration camps, to bogus racial purity tests held at gunpoint. The more subtle cultural aspects of the Nazi regime have their own place as well. Letters between colleagues in the new world highlight marginalization of women, persecution of homosexuals, and state control of art.

Perhaps the most unsettling subtlety is the normalization of Nazi thinking, and how it may have begun even before the war. In Anya's diaries, she describes how "friends I've known my whole life have all become Nazis. Mother and Father are not happy about it, but they comply rather than resist." Months later, she even admits "Everyone is a Nazi now. Or at least they pretend to be." A more direct example is BJ himself. BJ is shocked and infuriated when another character draws parallels between the racist history of the United States and the present-day Third Reich. It is implied that, apart from his cause, his psychology is not so different from the many soldiers he has killed himself. BJ coming to terms with this dissonance brings us to *The New Order*'s broadest point about fascism.

To kill Nazis is one aspect of fighting fascism, the game argues, but another is to look inward. Many Resistance characters voice doubt at their own personal goodness, and how certain they are of their cause. While planning their escape from a concentration camp, Set Roth tells BJ that “this place, this is the fruit of unquestioned, ferocious conviction. This is where absolute certainty leads”, and conversely, that “for me, in everything, there must be doubt. Otherwise, there’s no room to question, to learn.” Anya doubts her prospects in her journals, writing “I should keep fighting. But who is there to fight?” Klaus defected to the Resistance when he questioned too late, after devoting his life to fighting for the Third Reich’s ideals, only to lose the family he fought to protect at the hands of the Gestapo. Even a few unnamed Nazi characters reflect in their letters about the good the Third Reich is doing.

The broadest point of *The New Order*, then, is to urge its players to reflect and question themselves. The game’s protagonists are those who admit their uncertainty and come out wiser for it. Its villain is he who will never question himself or his cause. The Nazi world is built on arrogance, and humility will make it crumble.

Strongest Element

The New Order would not be such an effective anti-fascist story if its villains were not truly heinous. Where other World War II games stop at the front lines of battle, *The New Order* goes someplace few other games do, and shows us the Nazi vision realized. It shows what they would do with the world if there was nobody to stop them. It shows sparkling cities built by slave labor, it shows people starving and dying in death camps, it shows paranoid citizens spying on one another, and it shows purgation squads executing anybody they can find. Unlike its many contemporaries, *The New Order*’s villains are not left as an assumption. Every part of *The New Order*’s Nazi Germany is built to be terrifying and inhumane, and readily apparent as such.

Unsuccessful Element

The main hindrance to *The New Order*’s surprisingly close portrayal of a Nazi dominated world is the more fantastical plot elements. The *Wolfenstein* series is built on B-movie shlock as much as genuine history, and the remains of that shlock sometimes clash with the more serious tone of the game. Sandwiched between death camps and Stormtroopers are secret moon bases and mutated robot soldiers, robbing the game of gravitas. *The New Order* would have been much more effective in its portrayal of the Nazi threat and the Resistance if it had not had to interrupt the stern tone with laser guns and ancient mystical secret societies. As it stands, it is a very good *Wolfenstein* game, but could have been much more.

Highlight

In the world of *The New Order*, much of the unsettling atmosphere comes from seeing the sunny, successful face of nationalistic pride combined with the inhumanity that makes it possible. The newspapers, museum pieces, music records, and all sorts of pop culture tidbits scattered about Berlin paint an idyllic picture of peace, with sunny skies and summer fun always in the background. In reality, prisons and work camps sit side-by-side with apartments and schools, and armed soldiers are always on-hand to enforce orthodoxy.

In one particular scene, however, this dark juxtaposition is framed not over Nazi Germany, but the United States. In the Resistance hideout, BJ Blazkowicz has a run-in with J, a black man who lived America before it surrendered to the Nazis. J says that Blazkowicz took his orders from “the Man”, and mocks “the Man” for giving up immediately and cooperating so submissively with Nazi demands. When BJ tries to reassure him that “that’s not the America I fought for”, J sarcastically remarks about the civil rights denied to him by the United States. J asserts that BJ is blind to the truth and concludes by saying that “before the war, back home, man, you *were* the Nazis.”

This is what makes *The New Order* such an effective cautionary tale about nationalism and fascism. It doesn’t say “The Nazis are the villains” and leave matters at that. It also boldly points out “You could be the villains, too”. It reminds players that a Nazi, a fascist and a racist and a nationalist, is not simply a black uniform and German accent, but an ideal that can hide in the unquestioning patriotism of any nation.

Critical Reception

Wolfenstein: The New Order was lauded for its characters and compelling narrative in addition to its gameplay and graphics. The game’s Metacritic score stands at 81/100 for PC and 79/100 for consoles. IGN noted that BJ Blazkowicz is “deeper, better written, and more fleshed-out than he’s ever been”. The Polygon review makes mention that “*The New Order* also takes a stab at Western racism that goes beyond “the Nazis were evil”, drawing a direct line between the Third Reich and the United States’ ugly history of slavery, Jim Crow, and segregation” and that “*The New Order*’s humanity makes it something truly memorable”.

Lessons

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- It’s okay to shoot Nazis. It’s better to understand why. Don’t waste your villains by making them shallow. Let your audience know *exactly* why they are the villains. *The New Order* uses every storytelling tool to make it clear that the Nazi Party is not just a cheap villain, but a real part of history that thoroughly deserves its monstrous reputation.
 - Nobody is a saint all the time. Sometimes your characters need to be wrong, because it will resonate more with your audience. When your characters own up to their problems, you get the audience on their side. When BJ Blazkowicz, lantern-jawed hero and Nazi hunter, looks at himself and sees room for improvement, the audience feels safer in examining themselves the same way.
 - Stories need a consistent tone. When the tone keeps switching between serious and silly, you lose your audience’s focus. Between human brains being jammed into robot bodies and guard dogs with steel cyborg jaws, the more subtle horrors can be overlooked, and those are the ones that really matter for making a statement.

Summation

The writers of *The New Order* recognizes that a compelling action game needs only a role to assume and a foe to face, and chose to go further. The enemy is threatening and genuinely evil, and the heroes are only human. It sets an example other action games ought to follow with its plotting, and the fact that it dares to have a message is exceptional.