

Game Narrative Review

Your name (one name, please): Stav Hinenzon

Your school: DigiPen Institute of Technology

Your email: stav.hinenzon@gmail.com

Month/Year you submitted this review: December 2018

Game Title: Pyre

Platform: PC/PS4

Genre: Sports/Roleplaying

Release Date: July 25, 2017

Developer: Supergiant Games

Publisher: Supergiant Games

Game Designers: Amir Rao and Greg Kasavin

Game Writer: Greg Kasavin

Overview

Pyre is a hybrid sports/roleplaying game created by Supergiant Games in which the player leads a group of exiles to compete in a sacred tournament that gives them a chance to return home. In a kingdom called the Commonwealth, people who disobey the law are often sentenced to be exiled to a realm called the Downside. The player assumes the role of person known as the Reader who was exiled to the Downside for the crime of literacy, which is strictly forbidden. The Reader almost dies of exposure before being rescued by three wanderers. The wanderers possess a mysterious book the only the Reader is able to understand. The book describes a set of rites that can be performed by a team of exiles that might allow them to return home. Together with wanderers, the Reader forms a team called the Nightwings. They roam in their caravan through the Downside, competing with other bands of exiles for an elusive chance to escape the harsh realm they've been banished to.

Characters

The Nightwings:

Controlled by the player, the Nightwings are the benchmark team that all other teams must face in the final rite to earn their freedom. At the end of each set of rites, the player will face the highest scoring team at the Fall of Soliam. The winning team will return one of their members to the Commonwealth, ending their exile and permanently removing them from the game. The Nightwings' unique role in the rites always guarantees them a role in the final. This ensures that, regardless of the player's performance, each set of rites will always end with a proper climax in the form of a final match that will change the course of the narrative. The members of the team structurally function like the companions of an RPG party: each one is individually collected over the course of the game, each one serves a distinct role in battle, and each one has an individual side plot that can optionally be resolved.

- **The Reader:** A person exiled to the Downside for the crime of literacy and *Pyre*'s player character. The Reader's gender and background are selected by the player, but one constant is that they are somehow physically disabled, preventing them from directly participating in the rites. Despite their disability, the Reader's literacy makes them invaluable to the Nightwings as it allows them to use the book of rites to train the team members and determine the location of each rite. Due to their inability to participate in the rites, the Reader cannot return to the Commonwealth but chooses to help the Nightwings achieve their goals anyway, establishing a motif of self-sacrifice that recurs in other characters and is central to the game's climax.
- **Hedwyn:** One of the three initial Nightwings that rescues the Reader at the beginning of the game. Of those three Nightwings, Hedwyn is the one most sympathetic to the Reader, trusting of them and showing the most concern for their well-being. He is also, at first, the only human Nightwing. Both of these facts make Hedwyn a reliable emotional anchor for new players to relate to as they are introduced to the game and its world, allowing him to deliver much of the game's opening exposition in a natural and accessible manner. Hedwyn was exiled to the Downside after he deserted his post as a soldier in search of a Harp that he had fallen in love with, and his motivation to reunite with her drives his quest to return to the Commonwealth.

- **Jodariel:** Another of the three initial Nightwings, Jodariel is a demon, a person warped by the Downside's mystical energies after spending many years in exile. Like Hedwyn, she was a soldier before her exile. Her crime was freeing a group of young Harps who were captured and slated for execution. Jodariel contrasts Hedwyn's warm compassion by being colder and initially less trusting of the Reader. She warms up to them over the course of the game, and her levelheaded concern for the well-being of the Nightwings causes her to grow into the role of a team mom. Jodariel isn't as eager to return to the Commonwealth as the other Nightwings, initially joining the team to care for Hedwyn, who she knew as a child in the Commonwealth. Her selfless backstory and motivations enforce the game's theme of self-sacrifice.
- **Rukey:** Last of the three Nightwings that rescue the Reader. Rukey balances the trio of the initial three companions by having a more lighthearted personality that contrasts Hedwyn and Jodariel's seriousness. He provides many of the comic relief moments in the game's first sections. In the Commonwealth he worked as a smuggler, trafficking forbidden goods into and out of the nation. He used the money to take care of his aging mother. When Rukey was caught, he was exiled to the Downside. His desire to be able to take care of his family again drives him to try and escape his exile.
- **Volfred:** The patron of the Nightwings, Volfred is the one assembles the initial team of Jodariel, Rukey, and Hedwyn as well as giving them the tools needed to participate in the rites. His identity is kept secret at first, and one of the Nightwings' first objectives is to reunite with him at Cinderwood. The meeting with Volfred changes the team's motivation and provides the first major turn in the plot. Upon meeting Volfred, the patron reveals that he started the team in order to start a revolution. He was exiled to the Downside for running an illegal printing press. The motivation behind his patronage of the Nightwings is his desire to gather and release people who will work from within the Commonwealth to dismantle its regime.

Antagonists:

- **The Voice:** A mysterious figure who begins telepathically communicating with the Reader once they obtain the book of rites. At first, he helps the Reader understand the rites, teaching them the mechanics of the rituals and, by extension, the game. His advice is snarky and dismissive, but ultimately helpful, and as the Reader begins to prove their

competence, the Voice warms up to them more. This changes once Volfred reveals his identity and begins discussing his plans for revolution. Once that happens, the Voice becomes increasingly hostile towards the Reader, openly rooting for their loss. This is because the Voice is, in fact, Archjustice Androbeles IX, the tyrannical ruler of the Commonwealth. He was once exiled to the Downside, but he regained his freedom and used to rise to the highest position in the Commonwealth. He sees the exile and the quest to come back from it as a trial to better oneself by facing adversity, which is why he helps the teams' Readers on their journey.

- **Oralech:** A mysterious demon who continuously antagonizes the Nightwings. Oraclech was part of the previous incarnation of the Nightwings, along with Volfred. He was selected to be released back into the Commonwealth but was betrayed by a jealous teammate and pushed off the top of Mount Alodiel. As a result, he holds much resentment for the current Nightwings, especially towards Volfred, who he blames for not intervening in the conflict. Oraclech and his team serve as the game's final boss. If the Reader defeats him, they may choose to sacrifice the freedom of their team to grant Oraclech his stolen freedom, allowing the player to fulfill or subvert the theme of sacrifice referenced throughout the game.

Breakdown

One of *Pyre*'s most attention-grabbing aspects is its unique blend of genres. Sports and roleplaying are not genres that are paired often. Some sports games have implemented roleplaying game tools to enhance their narrative in the past. One such example is *FIFA17*'s dialogue tree heavy story mode, *The Journey*. *Pyre*'s genre-bending, however, goes much deeper. The game takes an extensive amount of expectations and systems from each genre. This genre line-blurring carries the risk of making a game overcomplicated and inaccessible. The excellence of *Pyre*'s design lies in the way it uses each genre's tools in a way that compensates for the other's weaknesses. The result is a unique experience with a significantly more dynamic narrative than that of a traditional roleplaying game.

Much of the meat of *Pyre*'s narrative comes from tools taken from roleplaying games. The narrative content itself, plot, character, world, is delivered to the player through interactive dialogue. This dialogue is presented in a way traditional to roleplaying games, a large box at the bottom of the screen. This brings the narrative text to the center of attention, and since reading

text is slow, this particular tool creates focused bursts of narrative that slow the game's pacing down. This works well for balancing out fast-paced moments of action. In a traditional roleplaying game this would be combat, but in *Pyre*, it's sports. Much of the plot structure is also similar to that of a roleplaying game. There is a central plot that the player must follow to complete the game (a main quest) and several optional subplots that the player can choose to engage with by talking to non-player characters (side quests). *Pyre* doesn't present these plots with a traditional journal system, so they aren't referred to as quests, but they share the same narrative shape and purpose. Each plot ultimately has very few outcomes, but when combined they weave in and out of each other to create a complex dynamic narrative.

The utility of bringing these roleplaying tools into a sports game is that they add dramatic context to the game's story. Watching a series of sporting matches, and only the matches, does create a narrative. Observers become attached to particular teams, casting them as protagonists or antagonists. Once that happens, the team's performance becomes the story's emotional valence. A heavy loss becomes a shocking turn; a close win becomes a thrilling climax. That story, however, lacks context, and that is what the text delivers. It lets the players know what the stakes are for each individual Nightwing. These stakes become especially prominent in the finals, where one of the team members gets a chance to go free. Knowing, for example, that winning this match will give Rukey the ability to support his family again makes the player care about the outcome of the match much more than if the only stake was just a trophy. This is similar to real life sports fans seeking material that documents players' lives outside their matches. The context creates drama which heightens the stakes. In this way, bringing the tools of roleplaying games into a sports game elevates the narrative.

Many games have used roleplaying elements to emphasize their narrative. What makes *Pyre*'s design stand out is the way in which it uses the narrative tools of sports games to enhance the roleplaying elements, turning the game into a true melding of genres. The first tool the game uses is the tournament structure often used in sports. Each set of rites in *Pyre* is modeled like a season in a sporting league. Teams face each other in a set number of matches, and then the team with the best win record goes on to the final playoffs. Unlike a traditional league, the Nightwings are always guaranteed a spot in the final for their spiritual significance, ensuring a climax to the narrative. The other important aspect of sports season *Pyre* uses is the validity of loss as a part of the story. Before the playoffs, teams that lose matches aren't eliminated from the season. The team keeps playing, their fans can still follow them, and the loss becomes a part of that team's

narrative for that season. The loss of a match is a valid outcome, even the loss of all matches is a valid outcome. This is in contrast to most roleplaying games, where a loss in the context of gameplay implies the death of the protagonist. This prevents the narrative from continuing and requires the game to go back to a previous point. *Pyre*'s use of the season model for its matches ensures that all outcomes allow the game to move forward preventing the story's pacing from stalling during difficult sections.

Roleplaying stories thrive on their dynamic nature. Players want to feel immersed in a world, involved in a story that they craft alongside the game. Creating a story with the level of interaction expected of roleplaying games often takes an immense amount of writing, spending time and resources. *Pyre*'s use of the season structure allows it to make its story highly dynamic while maintaining a low scope. Each subplot in *Pyre* usually only has two default outcomes, depending on whether the Nightwings win or lose a particular match. Additionally, every season ends with a major character ending their exile, an action that removes that character from the game. This means that any subplot can also be interrupted in one or two ways, effectively doubling the number of outcomes. These subplots can then be woven together in many different variations. After the game's first season, the option of which team the Nightwings will face next is not bound by the player's progress or their physical location in the game's world. This gives the player a lot of choice regarding which subplot to pick up next.

The result of this variance is that the sequence of events that makes up a playthrough of *Pyre* has an incredible number of permutations. This is especially potent when combined with the fact that the story utilizes the entire possibility space of the game's systems. With a limited amount of writing and a few clever systems, Supergiant Games have created an incredibly dynamic narrative that will always move cleanly from beginning to end no matter what the player does. In this way, *Pyre* leverages the sports genre to improve its roleplaying aspect, crafting a highly interactive story on an indie budget.

This narrative efficiency is the primary innovation of *Pyre*'s design. Both roleplaying and sports games form a sequence of events that tells a story. Each of these genres uses different tools to tell that story, and those tools have different strengths and weaknesses. *Pyre* cleverly uses the tools of each genre to account for the weaknesses of the other. The text-based storytelling of roleplaying games gives crucial dramatic context to the sports sections, heightening the stakes of an otherwise mundane activity. The systemic nature of sports allows the game to use its text in

an exceedingly efficient manner, making the narrative significantly more interactive. The genres complement each other rather than crowd each other. The result is a game that is able to deliver its narrative to the player in a unique way, and the experience is much better off for it.

Strongest Element

Pyre's story is structured around seasons that each end in a climactic final match. These final showdowns provide the game's strongest narrative moments. Every single one guarantees that a major character will permanently leave the story, immediately setting high stakes for the match. This significance is reinforced through a unique background track that is specific to each team the player can face. In a traditional boss battle, the player must replay the climax until they win, potentially lessening the intensity of the moment through repetition. In contrast, *Pyre*'s finals give the player only one chance to defeat their opponent, significantly increasing the tension. Additionally, the game is able to make the match feel like a satisfying bittersweet conclusion regardless of the result. If the player wins, one of their Nightwings is able to return home, fulfilling their arc but locking any future interactions with them. Since the player can only choose one of their highest-level players, this is a significant mechanical blow as well. If the player loses, the captain of the opposing team is able to return home, concluding their narrative arc. The final matches provide an interactive climax that highlights the game's dynamic storytelling.

Unsuccessful Element

When travelling between matches, the player is given the choice to stop their caravan at one of two locations before arriving at their destination. These stops often take a significant amount of time, as the caravan animates slowly from one location to the next and the actual encounter at location is conveyed through text. The player never sees the location they visit, and the text description is often too terse to paint a vivid picture, so the different locations never feel distinct. Depending on which location the player chose they receive a different minor buff, but that by itself isn't enough to make the choice feel meaningful. These minor scenes could have been used to convey more character or world-building, but their implementation is too tedious and non-descriptive to be satisfying.

Highlight

Throughout *Pyre*, the player is asked to make various choices and resolve numerous plotlines, and the game's epilogue skillfully weaves the threads together to craft a satisfying conclusion. After beating the game, the player is taken to a mural-like screen that contains every single named NPC that makes an appearance in the game. The player can then click on each character to see their fate after the events of the game. These vignettes not only incorporate the various subplots that were resolved during play, but also offer unique outcomes that result from multiple characters ending in the same location. These emergent outcomes create the impression of a vast dynamic world. Once the player has finished viewing all the vignettes, they are taken to a credits song that incorporates the player's actions in to its lyrics in a final innovative touch. *Pyre*'s final moments show the entirety of the game's complex narrative at once, and it does so in a way that allows the player to appreciate the choices they've made during their playthrough.

Critical Reception

Pyre was received well by both critics and audiences, indicated by a score of 82 on Metacritic¹ and a 90% positive review rate on Steam². IGN's TJ Hafer gave a particularly glowing review of the game's design stating that "From the art to the music to the story to the tactical gameplay, and even to how they're all woven together so artfully, *Pyre* is an adventure that excels in every area of its design."³ He ranked the game with a score of 9.7. The game's lack of a permanent game over state was highlighted by Christopher Byrd of the Washington Post, who noted that "no matter how decisive a loss might appear, the story rolls on in an interesting fashion with no 'Game Over' screen in sight."⁴ The game was nominated in four categories at 2017 Golden Joystick Awards, but didn't win in any of the awards⁵.

¹ Pyre. <http://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/pyre/critic-reviews>. Metacritic. 2017.

² Pyre. <https://store.steampowered.com/app/462770/Pyre/>. Steam. 2017.

³ Hafer, T. (2017, July 25). *Pyre* Review. Retrieved from <https://www.ign.com/articles/2017/07/25/pyre-review>

⁴ Byrd, C. (2017, July 25). Fun and well-paced, 'Pyre' is the rare game that wants players to embrace their slip ups. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/comic-riffs/wp/2017/07/25/fun-and-well-paced-pyre-is-the-rare-game-that-wants-players-to-embrace-their-slip-ups/?utm_term=.0e0ce8d46f4a

⁵ Chalk, A. (2017, November 17). Here are your 2017 Golden Joystick Award winners. Retrieved from <https://www.pcgamer.com/here-are-your-2017-golden-joystick-award-winners/>

Lessons

- **Genre defines the tools of the narrative** – Video game genres are often defined in terms of their mechanics. This includes the mechanics used to deliver the game’s narrative. Unlike in other mediums, different video game genres often deliver their stories in fundamentally different ways, which in turn results in different kinds of stories. Narrative designers should be familiar with the strengths and limitations of the genre they are working in to craft a narrative that works with the game that’s telling it.
- **Solutions to narrative problems can be found in other genres** – Interactive narrative is a complex endeavor that has been tackled by many different perspectives over the years. These different approaches have overcome different problems that arise when trying to create a coherent story in an interactive space, creating a large space of narrative tools spread across different genres. Narrative designers can expand their toolbox by looking at various genres and observing how they approach the problems of interactive narrative. These tools can then be applied outside their usual environment to create innovative designs that push the boundaries of video game storytelling.
- **Every gameplay outcome is a narrative possibility** – If a game’s plot consists of the events that happen over the course of the game, any result the gameplay produces becomes a part of that plot. In order to maintain a truly coherent narrative, games should account for as much of their possibility space as possible. Even games that feature a traditional death and reset mechanic should at least consider why the game’s events keep resetting.

Summation

Pyre cleverly mixes genres in a way that allows the genres’ narrative tools to complement each other, creating an innovative and dynamic story in the process. The game efficiently uses the possibility space of its gameplay to create a more dynamic narrative than it would have been able to otherwise. Its design breaks the mold for both roleplaying and sports games, demonstrating new ways for designers to tell their stories.