

Game Narrative Review

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Developer: Team Cherry

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Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Ari Gibson/William Pellen

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Overview

*In wilds beyond they speak your name with reverence and regret,
For none could tame our savage souls yet you the challenge met,
Under palest watch, you taught, we changed, base instincts were redeemed,
A world you gave to bug and beast as they had never dreamed.*

-From 'Elegy for Hallownest' by Monomon the Teacher

From deep within the heart of Hallownest, a being is imprisoned, constricted by bouldering steel chains. Rumbblings can be heard from inside the prison, there's something moving from inside the being. Orange.

An infection. Bubbling to the surface, it burst out of the being's eyes, sending a crack clean up the side of its head. It shrieks in pain, spewing the orange mist all around the inside of its chamber, revealing the room's egglike appearance. Three masks glow on the egg's outer wall, struggling to contain the orange goop seeping through its cracks. The masks of the dreamers.

Somewhere, in another place, a crisp wind blows throughout a dimly light valley covered in fog as a small figure trudges on under the guise of streetlamps. The figure resembles the one seen prior except it's smaller. A child? Armed with a rusted nail, the figure's eyes reveal themselves. Hollow. A ghost of the kingdom it walks.

The ghost arrives to the peak of the valley, the pale lights of a distant civilization in the background. The scenery calls to it, beckoning it back to its homeland where it can play its role in the greater narrative like a puppet. Without hesitation, the ghost leaps from its static position, falling down the valley headed off towards the structures in the foggy distance.

Upon landing, the ghost continues forward. No emotion nor reaction, just stalwart determination to complete whatever task it has set off for.

As the ghost reaches a clearing it arrives at a desolate town. Dirtmouth. The Elder bug, standing alone and despaired, stares into the distance. He is surrounded by the ruins

of what was once considered a quaint town. Upon coming closer, his attention is drawn to the knight. He speaks in a slow, deep drawl:

“Ho there, traveller. I'm afraid there's only me left to offer welcome. Our town's fallen quiet you see.

The other residents, they've all disappeared. Headed down that well, one by one, into the caverns below.

Used to be there was a great kingdom beneath our town. It's long fell to ruin, yet it still draws folks into its depths.

Wealth, glory, enlightenment, that darkness seems to promise all things. I'm sure you too seek your dreams down there.

Well watch out. It's a sickly air that fills the place. Creatures turn mad and travellers are robbed of their memories.

Perhaps dreams aren't such great things after all...”

Whether it be out of defiance, or lack of understanding towards the elder bug's warning, the ghost wastes no time in plunging itself into the horrors that lay below the surface of Hallownest, leaving the safety of the lonely cold town of Dirtmouth. The ghost, determined to see to it that it contains the infection it was called back to tend to, sets out on its journey through the labyrinthian ruins of a ruined kingdom to put an end to one of the greatest wars of ideals the world has seen.

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The previous section details the opening moments of Hollow Knight, the Metroidvania created and published by the indie company, Team Cherry. The game puts the player in the role of the ghostly avatar, simply named “The Knight.” The Knight is a vessel created from the in-universe substance “void” for the soul purpose absorbing and containing the infection known as “the radiance.” Certain objects and creatures like the Knight are gifted the ability to harness SOUL energy from other living creatures in Hallownest. These SOUL abilities provide the Knight with the extraordinary powers that double as some of the game's permanent upgrades.

The gameplay of Hollow Knight is divided largely into two distinct segments: Exploring the remains of the kingdom of Hallownest or exploring the dreamscape of its inhabitants.

Most of the game sees the player trying to uncover what has happened inside the kingdom walls while the Knight had been missing for years outside the kingdom. The kingdom is overrun by the horrible infection the radiance which takes control of the minds of the inhabitants of Hallownest, turning them into a collective hivemind focused on spreading its ideals as far and wide as possible. The radiance has effectively taken over most bugs below the surface save for a few stragglers such as the nail masters, mantis tribe, and grubs, who's focused and ideals are unparalleled, stowing themselves away in silence in order to distance themselves from the rest of the corrupted world.

As stated before, the radiance takes control of a bug's mind, corrupting their ideals in favor of its own. This leads the Knight to use his dream nail which is given to him by the Seer early on in order to jump inside of their dreamscape to explore their memories of a better time and clear the corruption from their thoughts. This is also the games way to let the player see past events since most important plot points have already occurred, leaving it up to the player to scoop up and study the pieces.

The game rewards the player for finding secrets with tidbits of lore, whether that be an NPC, sign, or even something like a crumbled statue from a past time. With 40+ hours of content packed into this \$15 experience, there is no shortage of content to break down and discuss regarding Hollow Knight.

Characters

Important Major Characters:

These characters play a major role in the games story through their effect on the world

- **The Knight/Ghost** – The player avatar. The vessel of a child created for the soul purpose of combatting the radiance. Presumably given no will or emotion, the Knight is tasked with serving as Hallownest's puppet until the bitter end. Despite this, the Knight is not considered to be the perfect vessel and was cast into the abyss with the rest of its siblings at a young age by the Pale King. This hints that

the Knight may have some will alternative to what it was created for. This is backed up by the large amount of choices the player is presented with, most of which appear to be done out of a want to do good rather than to be completed as an order such as: saving the grubs, presenting the delicate flower to the Elderbug, or spending time with Quirrell on multiple occasions.

- **Hornet** – Older sister to the Knight, referred to as the gendered child by many. Unlike her siblings, Hornet was created as a gift to be given to the dreamer Herrah the Beast by the pale king. She instead willingly took the role of gatekeeper of Hallownest when the kingdom fell to ruin, and her mother was put into an eternal slumber. She's a bit rash, impulsive and quick to temper however she balances good morals with harsh discipline perfectly. Hornet believes in the lie that she alone should be the one to reseal the black egg and absorb the radiance, often crossing nails with the Knight over the course of their journey. She is, however, also one of the Knight's greatest ally's, saving them from harm and assisting them in a fight with their older sibling, the Hollow Knight at the end of the game, even potentially sacrificing herself in one of the game's endings.

- **The Hollow Knight** –

No cost too great.

No mind to think.

No will to break.

No voice to cry suffering.

Born of God and Void.

You shall seal the blinding light that plagues their dreams.

You are the Vessel.

You are the Hollow Knight.

The Hollow Knight is the vessel chosen by the Pale King to be raised in order to contain the infection of the Radiance. Being locked inside the black egg, they are tasked with subduing the infection inside themselves, bearing the burden of Hallownest alone. They are often praised as a legend by the people of Hallownest, as seen through the many monuments built in their liking. Despite its supposed status as the perfect vessel, the Hollow Knight was tarnished by “an idea instilled”

during its upbringing with the Pale King, forming relationships and a will. Because of this, the infection takes partial control of them. When the Knight fights the Hollow Knight, it is caught in another battle inside of its own mind for control of its body, stabbing itself in order to assist the Knight and Hornet in their quest. It could be argued that the Hollow Knight fits the mold for a protagonist more so than the Knight or Hornet.

- **The Pale King (The Wrym)** – The long-deceased ruler of Hallownest. Even though this character is never directly interacted with throughout the course of the game, the Pale King is the main contributing factor for setting the game’s plot in motion. Starting off as the ancient Wrym, travelling throughout the land, the soon-to-be Pale King found itself out the outskirts of Hallownest. Taking the form of something more closely resembling the inhabitants, he decided to grant the bugs of this land a higher intelligence through sapience. Soon enough, all the bugs of Hallownest willingly came under his rule and through his essence as a higher being, the Kingdom of Hallownest was born. He was dubbed “the Pale King” due to his almost entirely white appearance and bright glow he gave off to those around him. The Pale King is not only seen as a king, but a God to the people, many crediting him for their lives. Once the Radiance returned, however, the Pale King came up with the idea to use void, a recently discovered insanely powerful material to craft soulless vessels in which to trap and destroy the Radiance inside of. In doing this, however, The Pale King and his subordinates created living beings with emotions and wills of their own, only to be cast back into the abyss where the void is formed. In game, the abyss is a dark area brimming with void. The walls and floor have been long covered with the corpses of his “impure” kin. It is revealed in a cutscene that the Knight too was cast into this pile of corpses but somehow managed to escape, receiving the “Kings crest” at the cast off shell of the Pale King later on in the story, taking up the mantle of the new King of Hallownest.
- **The Radiance** – The radiance is the antagonist of Hollow Knight and final boss of the game. She, like the Pale King, is revered as a God among the moth tribe. Before the Wrym, the Radiance ruled over Hallownest, providing its inhabitants

with safety in exchange for control over their thoughts. In its death, the Radiance itself represents more of an ideal rather than a being. After being forgotten about by Hallownest and abandoned by her own tribe which she gave life to, the Radiance slowly faded away with only glimmers of her remaining through memories. This resulted in the Radiance creeping back into the minds of the bugs over time, spawning the bright orange infection that swept through the kingdom prior to the Knight's Arrival. The vessels are created of void because it is the Radiance's natural enemy. At the end of the Godmaster expansion, the Knight faces off against the true power of the Radiance, killing it off completely and, in the process, unleashing the unrelenting inky forces of void into the world.

Important Minor Characters:

These are characters that may show up consistently throughout the game, but ultimately don't play much of a roll in its grander narrative

- **Quirrell** – Quirrell is an older bug and ally to the Knight. He is encountered multiple times throughout the game, conversing with the Knight and even lending a hand on occasion. Like the Knight, Quirrell finds himself on the outskirts of Hallownest, having forgotten his purpose, only having a mask, his nail, and his will to guide him. To Quirrell, nails represent a being's will to survive and so he treats his as a part of his being. Much like the player, he wishes to observe and explore the ruined kingdom in hopes of uncovering the truths it hides. He's always very polite to those he converses with and approaches all situation with a childlike sense of wonder and exploration. In a canon prequel comic, Quirrell is confronted by Hornet, who tells him to leave the kingdom for his own sake. They clash nails and upon seeing his mask, Hornet lets him go. It is revealed that Quirrell is the apprentice of Monomon the teacher, one of the three dreamers. She entrusted him with her mask which would be used to break the seal protecting her during her slumber in order to allow the Knight to kill her and open the black egg housing the Hollow Knight. Quirrell also assists the Knight by revealing the weakness of the boss guarding Monomon, Uumuu. After fulfilling his purpose of helping the Knight, he sets his nail down at blue lake and disappears.

- **Zote the Mighty** – The butt of all jokes. Zote the Mighty closely resembles the Knight, however, upon being saved early on, he does nothing but cause problems. He takes credit for the Knights work, constantly berating him and speaking highly of his self. Much to the dismay of the player, he manages to convince a lot of the people he meets that he is all powerful, wooing them with his legendary 57 precepts, which are really just Zote listing off a bunch of small tips he lives by. Keep in mind these are the same tips that keep finding him stuck between a rock and a hard place. Despite his tough talk, Zote is nothing more than a joke, being completely unable to even damage the Knight in the one duel they hold. One thing to note however, is Zote's absolutely unparalleled ability to bounce back from failure. Whether through sheer determination or stupidity, Zote always puts himself in increasingly difficult situations, which while these normally turn out bad for him, this blind confidence may be more beneficial if some of the other characters were to try and imitate it.
- **Cornifer** – The map salesman. He appears in every area of the game, humming a tune as he doodles maps for the locations he visits. Even though his maps are largely unfinished, he and his wife run their business successfully, probably in large part to the knight's contributions to sales. He is generally outgoing and loves his job, being seen going home after a good day's work and resting for what can be assumed to be another day filled of exploring to come. He and the Knight form a relationship through their travels and he normally gives the Knight tips on some points of interest on his map. It should be noted however that even he has his limits though and refuses to go deep into extremely dangerous territory such as Deepnest.
- **Elderbug** – The first person you meet. Being the last resident of the small, abandoned town of Dirtmouth, Elderbug is lonely and sad, guiding travellers down into the infected tunnels of Hallowmest never to be seen again. The Elderbug acts as a symbol of hope in the game, being somewhat of a mascot for Dirtmouth. He's meek and kind and his pessimism is cured slowly throughout the game as more bugs return from the depths to create a home for themselves in Dirtmouth. In a way, Elderbug can be used to track the Knights progress early on

since houses will slowly begin to repopulate with the NPCs you meet. The Elderbug is also one of the possible recipients of the delicate flower, cherishing this act of kindness, restoring hope to the small town.

- **Cloth** – The cowardly ally. Obsessed with the prospect of dying in battle and joining her deceased Nola, Cloth is a character the Knight runs into repeatedly. She is normally seen fleeing and hiding from dangerous situations, however, throughout the course of the story, she becomes more of a courageous character. Towards the end of the game, depending on the player's actions she either chooses to assist the Knight in their fight with the traitor lord, where she will exchange finishing blows with the boss before dying herself soon after, thanking the Knight for being her inspiration to grow as a person, or, leaving Hallownest to seek battle elsewhere, her bond with the Knight serving as her motivation to continue to fight.
- **Seer** – The Seer is the last surviving member of the moth tribe. She arms the Knight with the dream nail, an item which lets the Knight enter memories and the minds of creatures. This item is essential to sealing the radiance as the battle with it happens inside the mind. She takes responsibility for her tribe in abandoning the radiance in its time of need, saying that the radiance turned into the malevolent force it became because of the actions of her tribe. To make up for past crimes, she vows to act as a mentor to the Knight who she deems to be the wielder of the dream nail. Once she teaches the Knight all she can, she evaporates into essence.
- **Dung Defender (and the five knights of Hallownest)** – Ogrim, or rather, the Dung Defender is an important boss in the game's lore. Ogrim belonged to the group known as the five great knights of Hallownest who served under the pale king during his rule. Ogrim is notable for his extreme sense of loyalty to the Pale King, as well as his outgoing and optimistic attitude. Unfortunately, he hides a great sadness, abandoning his comrades when the infection hit, hiding himself away in the royal waterways. He does not fall to the infection but is unaware of the state of his former friends, convincing himself that they will one day show up looking for him. Upon meeting the Knight, he mistakes them for a husk and attacks them. After battle, however, he apologizes for jumping to conclusions and

can be seen creating a sculpture of the Knight in his den as a symbol of friendship. When dream nailed, an optional boss can be triggered which represents the Dung Defender in his prime, bearing sleek pale armor along with improved speed and strength. The fight takes place within the white palace with the memories of the pale king and the other four knights watching from afar. When the fight is one, Ogrim's friends disappear, causing him to fall to his knees.

Factions:

These serve as both parts of the world as well as unique cultures which contribute to Hallownest in their own right

- **Mantis Tribe** – The last surviving civilization in Hallownest. The mantis tribe are a group of Rogues set apart from the kingdom of Hallownest. They are a warrior focused tribe, keeping to themselves and battling any who choose to enter their domain. They do however, honor strong warriors and so, safe passage and respect in their village is given to the Knight through besting the mantis lords in combat. The tribe is somehow collectively resistant to the radiance, most likely out of their strong willpower, however, traitors of the group who are outcasted succumbed to the infection out of a lust for a greater power. This group of traitors is led by the traitor lord, brother to the three sisters that make up the mantis lords.
- **The Dreamers** – Monomon the teacher, Lurien the watcher, and Herrah the Beast. The three dreamers willingly gave their bodies in order to seal the Hollow Knight inside the black egg. They try to dissuade the Knight from its quest by trapping them inside the dream realm, however the Knight succeeds in killing them and releasing the seal to fight the Hollow Knight and contain the infection itself.
- **The Nailmasters** – Pupils to a small merchant bug known as Sly, the Nailmasters serve as sparing partners to the Knight, secluding themselves away from the rest of the world to live in peace. They do not fall to the infection and serve as mentor characters, teaching the Knight new moves to use with their nail.
- **The Stags** – These loyal workers of Hallownest once served as the world's mode of transport across the "stag tunnels." The Knight only encounters one stag who

remains loyal to them and builds a bond over time as more of the tunnels reopen due to the Knight's actions.

- **Godseekers** – A foreign race of bugs obsessed with finding or creating new gods. The entire race of Godseekers resides inside the mind of one host. They task the knight with using the “God tuner” they give them in order to track down and “tune” the minds of the bosses they face. These memories can be brought to the Godhome where the Godseekers resurrect these bosses as gods.

Breakdown

Hollow Knight is an extremely interesting choice for a narrative breakdown due to its unique stance on story structure and stance on the topic of Narratology versus Ludology. With an adventure spanning over 40 hours, Hollow Knight presents its players with a vast world to explore at their own pace, in their own way and so the game puts an emphasis on gameplay in order to justify story, as most games with an embedded narrative do. In addition, Team Cherry have left things purposefully vague in a lot of instances, imploring the player to reach their own conclusions. My breakdown may very well not line up exactly the way Team Cherry intended it to, but that level of interpretation is what makes Hollow Knight a very special narrative.

Beyond the initial opening segment already discussed in the overview, Hollow Knight shoves the player into the unknown without so much as a holler. After stumbling around a bit, the Knight comes across an enemy with an impenetrable shell that they are too weak to face off against. They meet a snail Shaman not too far from here, who grants them the ability to focus soul into blasts of energy. With a means in which to continue exploring, the Knight makes quick work of the previously invincible foe and continues deeper into the labyrinth of Hallownest. They encounter a mysterious figure cloaked in red who they eventually chase into the scenery of Greenpath. The figure manages to evade them, jumping up a ledge too high for the Knight to reach. Defeated, the player is left to explore their environment for upgrades to allow them to continue chase. The Knight eventually comes across the acidic Fungal Wastes, which houses the Mantis village, a secluded civilization hostile to outsiders. They manage to fight their way through the village in order to reach the Mantis Lords, who they best in combat and are

rewarded with the mantis claw, allowing them to scale up walls to confront the cloaked figure. Scaling the wall, the cloaked figure did, the Knight comes face to face with her. Her name is Hornet, the protector of Greenpath. Turning to greet the Knight, she speaks:

“Come no closer, ghost.

I’ve seen you, creeping through the undergrowth, stalking me.

This old kingdom... A terrible thing awakens. I can smell it in the air...

I know what you are. I know what you’d try to do. I can’t allow it...”

After the brief exchange which provides more questions than answers, Hornet and the Knight engage in combat, with Hornet fleeing, defeated. The surrounding brawl causes the corpse of a bug with similar appearance to the knight falling over to present its gift of the mothwing cloak, allowing the Knight to dash around on nimble feet. With the figure gone and the area explored, the Knight makes its way deeper, running into the False Knight, an infected maggot posing as the great knight Hegemol. The maggot and the Knight engage in combat without a word spoken between the two. The Knight makes quick work of the imposter, killing him and looting his armor of its city crest. This leads the night to a bridge of an area engrossed in water raining from the ceiling. This is the gateway to the city of tears, the capital city of Hallownest and central location in the game’s story. The city’s gate is closed and barred from any intruders, however, with the city crest in hand, the Knight is able to open a path to the city, where they discover that the once beautiful capital had fallen to the infection, with its inhabitants hostile towards anything not possessed by the infection of the radiance.

From here the game opens up greatly to the player as the city of tears connects many areas of the game together, forming serving not only as a large area in the game, but also a connector between the versatile regions.

If it seems as though the previous paragraphs simply paraphrased what the average opening hours of a playthrough of Hollow Knight is, it’s because that’s exactly what my first impressions. I feel the need to emphasize that Hollow Knight *only* gives lore for those willing to seek it. Just playing through the game, the player might have a rough interpretation of who the character of the knight is, and how this once bustling kingdom fell to ruin, but context for a lot of the things experienced in this game are told to the player after the fact. As mentioned before, this is because of Hollow Knights

approach to narratology vs ludology in its role as an embedded narrative. Hollow Knight is one of many in a line of Metroidvania games. The inherited fact of this makes much of Hollow Knight's content optional with the player only really needing to perform a short number of tasks in order to reach the eventual goal of killing the Hollow Knight, containing the radiance. Technically, the game only asks the player to kill the three dreamers in order to do this early on, and it is up to the player to decide on which upgrades they'll need in order to do so. Which abilities are needed, which paths must be taken, and which bosses must be fought varies greatly between each player. As a result, Hollow Knight puts ludology first, focusing on environmental traversal and simple but snappy combat with the result of doing these things well rewarding the player with context for their actions.

One could make the argument that the Knight and player are supposed to be one in the same. While the Knight is originally from Hallownest, it has forgotten its past and the world around them has changed, effectively making the Knight foreign to this new world. Like the player, the Knight has no understanding of its purpose or why it was called back to Hallownest in the first place, and its only through playing the game, that both player and character discover together. This theme of discovery and acceptance is also present in many of the game's characters too, like Quirrell, who finds himself in a similar situation and slowly realizes and accepts his purpose in life over the course of the game's narrative. Another example of this could be Hornet, who emphasizes her role as a guardian, passing judgement on those she meets, eventually softening up to the Knight and even expressing some of her weakness vocally in a touching confession, eventually leading to her aiding the Knight in the fight against their sibling, the Hollow Knight. The Hollow Knight is arguably the best example of this theme though. Unlike Hornet, the Hollow Knight was born to fight a battle it couldn't win, building bonds with those close to them, fooling others into believing the lie that they were in fact, Hollow. The Hollow Knight accepted being someone it wasn't, and it wound up costing the kingdom. One could argue, however, that the Hollow Knight isn't wrong in doing this and may have done so out of fear that it would have been killed and cast into the abyss like the rest of its kind.

Breaking down the rest of Hollow Knight we will be looking at examples of the Ideology, Discourse, Binary opposition, and Decomposition found within examples of the game's narrative.

Ideology

Hollow Knight is no stranger into dipping its metaphorical toes into the world of debate. One of the most sought-after topics must be the argument of the existence of free will, an argument which the game takes a very interesting take on. Wills are what I would consider the central theme of Hollow Knight's story. The kingdom of Hallownest is deadlocked in at a war of wills since the beginning of the story, but as history reveals itself, we see that this wasn't always the case. The kingdom of Hallownest was, at one point, a hive mind to the godly force of the radiance. In exchange for thought, the radiance protected the bugs of the land as long as they continued to remember her brilliance and worship her as their god. Her will overpowered the land and it was not until the Wyrms arrived in order to break people from this ideology, bringing them into his own, that being one of greater intelligence and free will, that this mindset was challenged. The people of Hallownest almost entirely changed their ideals, effectively forcing the radiance out of existence, who was acting out of what she thought was the right thing to do. With this change of ideology, the people built a thriving civilization, complete with booming technology and prosperity. The will of the radiance did not die, however, and eventually struck back, corrupting out of malevolent intent into the infection plaguing the land we see in game. This corrupted will sent the kingdom into ruins, causing many to flee to the surface and beyond the kingdom's barriers.

This is where the Knight comes in, made of a supposedly hollow vessel, they pose no will of their own. Naturally, this makes them the perfect being to defeat the radiance, with no mind to think. Throughout the story, however, this idea could be called into question through things that the player experiences. I personally believe the Knight does have a will to do right in their eyes. If not then why else would they choose to save all the grubs in captivity, save Zote from certain death, deliver the delicate flower to the traitor's grave, sit with Quirrell in silence during his final moments, or even partake in any of the Grimm Troupe's schemes? None of these actions immediately had any logical reward to them. Some action the player can do don't give you any reward, or even arguably hinder

you but. In turn though, these interactions serve to make those around you happier. It is true that all things mentioned above are entirely optional. the player doesn't have to be nice if they don't want to, in fact, they can be rather rude if they choose, but then why would the game present the player with the option? That is because the Knight has a will to act.

Discourse

The locales of Hollow Knight are certainly a sight to behold, however, looking a bit deeper into the world the game has crafted, it is deeply engrossing to discover the many cultures and languages the world creates for itself. For example, the kingdom of Hallownest has its own primary language. An actual, completely legible and decipherable written language. Of course, the game doesn't expect its players to learn such a language, it never even makes note of it. Fans have, however, taken it upon themselves to try their hardest to decipher and breakdown the written language, since the adorable gibberish of the bugs repeats lines too much to make anything comprehensible.

Taking it even one step beyond this, the Fungal Wastes house a new race of mushroom-like creatures, unlike the bugs found everywhere else. These mushroom people house their own dialect as the knight cannot understand their writings or speech without the use of the "spore shroom" charm which gives the Knight mushroom like properties. This isn't the only culture tucked away from the rest of Hallownest, with many housing central locations of the game such as: The barbaric mantis tribe or coliseum of fools, the elegant Godhome, the savage and terrifying Deepnest, or the long-lost monarch of the Hive. There are so many things to discuss regarding the cultures of Hollow Knight that this paper could have been spent deconstructing each, comparing and contrasting them for tens of pages to come, but it's best to leave some wonder to the imagination.

Binary Opposition

The two main opposing forces in this game are the inky, empty void, and the bright, overpowering radiance. Both serve to balance each other out, being able to take control of soul energy to harness for themselves. The void does this in its vessels, having the soul act as fuel for a vessel's special abilities. The radiance does this by taking control of a being's entire body, stringing them along as puppets. While the Knight itself is born

of void, the very essence of void is never painted as the “good” to the radiance’s “evil.” The game, in fact, makes the point of showing that both must exist to balance each other out. Without the void, the radiance takes hold of the minds of every bug as seen in game, but without radiance, the void itself can also spread to consume as it does after the fight with the absolute radiance. What happens after the fact is unfortunately never touched upon, and so what remains of the characters and kingdom of Hallownest is left up to player interpretation, but the message remains clear all the same. There is no good or bad, only through balance, is there prosperity.

Decomposition

The story of Hollow Knight’s creation was rather wholesome. Team Cherry loved the idea of simple, cute, bug-like characters they had created years prior and wanted to put those characters into a platformer with a heavy emphasis on exploration and odd moments, building its world and characters through the mechanic of exploring. In an interview with the duo, they refer to some of the inspirations Hollow Knight draws from,

“A couple of games that we played on the NES, things like Zelda 2 or Faxanadu’ Pellen starts explaining. ‘You know the original Zelda... It’s actually stuff that people probably don’t think of at all. For me it’s just things like A Link to the Past and Majora’s Mask... These are games where they crammed in as many odd moments as possible. And that’s the stuff which is really interesting.’” (Dealessandri, 2018)

With this information in mind, it's quite easy to see how this innocent love for wanting the player to explore their environment led to a story about the ruins of a former kingdom and uncovering the reason for its destruction. This also blends quite easily into mixing gameplay with narrative since it wouldn’t be realistic to have NPCs spew exposition onto the player, rather, have them earn the context through playtime.

Endings

Finally, let’s discuss the games endings. In the “the hollow knight” ending, the knight defeats the Hollow Knight and takes its place inside the black egg in order to contain the radiance, being sealed inside. In the “sealed siblings” ending, Hornet aids the Knight in assisting the final blow, but the attack fails, trapping the Knight, Hornet, and the Hollow Knight inside of the black egg. In the third ending, “dream no more” the Knight fights the weakened state of the radiance inside of the Hollow Knight’s mind,

bringing her into the void. Hornet awakens in front of where the black egg used to be and the Knight's shell is seen on the ground, cracked. The final, and what one can assume is the canon ending, "embrace the void" has two variations. One takes place where the Godhome is overrun with the void as a result of the complete eradication of the absolute radiance. The Godseeker becomes possessed by the void, confronting Hornet who readies for combat. The other variation happens if the delicate flower is given to the Godseeker, where the void is instead absorbed into the flower as the possession begins. Each of the game's endings aren't exactly considered happy endings, but they do leave much up to the imagination and fit the themes discussed in this paper quite well. Most of these endings represent the balance between void and radiance, while others represent the wills of characters. Because of this, I think these endings are the perfect way to end the game's narrative, even if there are no further continuation of this game's story.

Strongest Element

The strongest part of Hollow Knight's lore is the way it's delivered. Lore is generally given to the player as a reward for exploring and trying out new things. This could be a turn off for some players if they aren't also given upgrades to their abilities just as often, but the game finds a nice balance of hiding goodies with lore tidbits. The fact that the game's NPCs are also a main contributor to explaining the lore of the world really adds to the immersive atmosphere the game provides. Because these are characters telling the player events that have happened, they have a bias and will tell the same event different according to their morals. This adds depth to the interactions with the NPCs, making the characters memorable and helping to fill in the gaps in the player's mind.

Unsuccessful Element

At the same time, with Hollow Knight, it is very easy to miss vital lore. This can happen because of the way Hollow Knight presents its story. Most of the game's story is told through lore tablets and NPC dialogue with very little explicit cutscenes. This is an issue as Hollow Knight has secrets around every corner. It's very easy to miss one or to find one meant to be found later and given lore which doesn't make sense out of context. NPCs also have many things to say, having something entirely new to converse with the

player about every time they see them. This makes it hard to reliably track which NPCs have something to say regarding the lore and what triggers they must unlock it. Fortunately, the internet is extremely helpful with documenting the text of this game and when it occurs which makes following the story much easier, but I would not be surprised if this extremely open ended focus drove a lot of potential fans of this games story away right off the bat. Not to mention that the game is not exactly written in modern English, rather dialogue often reads out almost poetically. This is a problem since poems are known for being able to be interpreted differently, meaning that it would be very easy for the average player to interpret the words as something else entirely. Even when there are cutscenes, they are almost entirely wordless and because the dialogue is voiced in its own unique language, all events must be shown through character actions.

There is a very compelling story to tell, and I think its delivery is what makes Hollow Knight special, but I think it is also the story's greatest weakness in drawing in new fans to the series, especially with a sequel on the way.

Highlight

The moment that stuck out to me most of all while playing Hollow Knight absolutely had to be the true ending of the game. As mentioned previously, when the Knight defeats the absolute Radiance, her essence is destroyed. This is done through the combined efforts of the Knight as well as the void which intrudes into the Godhome. With its natural enemy erased, the void expands, consuming the knight and the Godseeker in the process on a quest to spread just as the previous infection did.

I think this moment stands out to me as even though the game hints that void isn't necessarily any better than Radiance, the important lesson of balance between the two is genius. Both void and radiance are necessary evils towards each other, neither good nor bad. Without the one, the other takes control. It is an absolutely brilliant teaching moment and really calls the player to question whether or not what they were doing over the course of the game was the correct thing to do since the result is arguably worse than before. There is some hope left however as if the player gives the Godseeker the delicate flower, it can purify the void, preventing it from reaching outside of the Godseekers vessel, effectively killing the memories of all the bugs inside the mind of the Godseeker,

but ultimately preserving Hallownest and protecting all life within its walls. This also draws parallels between the player and the Pale King since both approaches to the issue at hand cost the lives of many. No cost too great.

Critical Reception

Kotaku (Kirk Hamilton) - No Score

“Hollow Knight could easily have tied its fast-travel to a series of magical signposts or some other inanimate object. Team Cherry’s decision to instead feature a surprisingly soulful talking transport, complete with its own quest line and backstory, embodies much of what makes the game special.”

This review gushes about Hollow Knight’s interconnected insect world, priding it on explaining the innerworkings of its kingdom and challenging players to route their own course through its ruin. The reviewer mentions that each “character tells a story without saying a word” and that this stands true for the locales as well. This review tackles the smaller details of the game world.

Gamespot (Alessandro Barbossa) - 9/10 Score

“[Hollow Knight’s] rich 2D world is filled with tragic tales of a lost kingdom that unfurl during an expansive adventure that feels breathless from its humble beginnings to its climatic, emotional end.”

Gamespot describes Hollow Knight as a game constantly throwing new and exciting areas for you to explore that make it easy to get lost in for hours. The vast variety of characters and locales justify the absolutely huge game world and it’s always a joy to see what lies around each corner.

Destructoid (Jed Whitaker) - 10/10 Score

“Why is [the Knight] venturing into [Hallownest]? It isn’t clear at the beginning, but the truth soon reveals itself in a lore that leaves a lot up to interpretation, in my opinion, but that is not a bad thing at all.”

Jed explains in his review that the mystery and search for answers in an already charming world kept him playing until he was satisfied. He says he grew connections to

the games characters through their unique dialect which he “found [himself] quoting by the end of the game”

Lessons

- **Don't be afraid to use cute characters to tell a dark story**

Hollow Knight was made with the idea of using cute characters to explore a dark world. It has many mature themes and yet at first glance, it would be easy to think that the overall cute character design sets the tone of the game's narrative. There's a stigma that games need to be dark and edgy to be taken seriously, that strange occurrences and comedic breaks don't serve purpose in a serious narrative but that can't be further from the truth. This close-minded thought process is blatantly wrong in the world of Hollow Knight, which has moments where its cute characters are used to disturbing and scary effect, such as the fight with Nosk (or the entirety of Deepnest for that matter), or the abyss filled with the bodies of what are essentially infants. You can see the effect the visuals have on these moments as they tend to be the most talked about highlights in the Hollow Knight community.

- **Open ended storytelling has a place in the world**

It's possible to run through Hollow Knight and barely understand a thing, but that doesn't mean the game has a bad narrative. Hollow Knight relies heavily on easter eggs and environmental storytelling in ways most games do not. It's much more effective to see the aftermath of what once was a capital city, standing solemnly for the player to see for themselves rather than have them be told about it. This story is rich and is set up in a way calling players to communicate with each other to piece their findings together. This is something that famous director Hideo Kojima is known for doing and so the fact that an indie studio can stand its ground against a gaming giant really like this really speaks volumes to its quality.

- **The best way to give a story to someone, is to make them earn it**

Often, it's a bad decision to start a game with a twenty-minute cutscene. Most players want to get engrossed in the story of a game, but that comes after the gameplay has hooked them. This is where Hollow Knight comes into play. Through making the players learn and understand the gameplay, it calls them to use its mechanics in order

to find secrets which build the world and characters. This is done largely through unlockables, optional boss fights, quests and hidden areas.

- **It's okay to be vague**

This lesson kind of goes hand-in-hand with the previous one, but speculation is the lifeblood of large singleplayer communities. A large part of the enjoyment of Hollow Knight's narrative is coming up with your own solution as to how things happened since we never actually directly see any of these major events take place, just the outcome. We never actually see who the radiance was, only what the world has made her to be, the same can be said for Hornet or even side characters with mysterious backstories like the Grimm Troupe. This leads to a healthy discussion between multiple parties and is what solidifies a game as a memorable experience.

- **Silent protagonists can have character**

It's common for games to have a silent protagonist who has nothing to comment on, even if they should. This can come off as stilted, but Hollow Knight uses this to great effect, building the player up as a "vessel" into the part of this world, giving justification for a standard design decision. This makes the connection between the player and protagonist stronger than it would be otherwise, since they think and move as one. It's almost jarring to see moments in this game where the player doesn't have control over the Knight, and that's because of the established unity of the characters.

Summation

I think Hollow Knight represents something greater in the gaming community. This, of course, is the unbeatable passion just two people can have when creating a unique, complex, and immersive society, fleshing out a history complete with political figures, religions, cultures, factions, heroes, and legends. I also like Hollow Knight's bold approach at making the player earn the lore through gameplay. It's done so seamlessly compared to other games, even great ones, which tend to have long exposition dumps either through dialogue or walls of text the player is expected to read. Most things in Hollow Knight are optional, including most of the game's lore, and so I find that despite all this, the fact that Team Cherry created one of the best narratives in all of gaming

really speaks volumes when discussing the story of Hollow Knight. Not to mention all this was done without a word of spoken dialogue.

Citations

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