

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Furi
Platform: PC, PS4, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch
Genre: Hack-and-Slash/Bullet Hell
Release Date: July 5th, 2016
Developer: The Game Bakers
Publisher: The Game Bakers
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Audrey Leprince and Melanie Decroix

Overview

Furi is a vibrant, violent sci-fi boss rush that follows a mysterious mute inmate imprisoned on a series of islands floating far above the planet's surface. Each island is a unique biome that is home to a series of strange prison guards that serve as the game's bosses.

While varied in personality, appearance, and gameplay the guardians share one commonality; namely their desire to stop the inmate from ever making it back to their home planet. The majority of the game is comprised of two straightforward parts: defeating a guardian in combat and walking to a new area to face the next opponent.

Although most high-speed action games use story for little more than set dressing, the slow boil mystery surrounding the silent protagonist, his untrustworthy liberator, and his unforgivable crime serves as an interesting narrative framework that sets Furi apart from similar titles.

Characters

- **Rider** – The player avatar who never speaks or makes any attempt at communication is essentially nameless, save for one instance towards the end where a character calls him Rider, so we shall refer to him as such. Much of the game is spent wondering why Rider is imprisoned, where he comes from, and what drives him to return to the planet's surface so badly that he is willing to relentlessly cut down guardian after guardian who stand in his way. For most of the game, all we know for sure is that Rider cannot be killed (as his captors have tried many times) and that Rider is considered extremely dangerous.

- **The Voice** – The Voice is an enigmatic man who hides his face using a purple bunny mask and does not seem to be constrained by the normal laws of physics as he frequently teleports around to odd positions, giving him a surreal, dreamlike mystique. He is also the one who initially frees Rider from his restraints, setting him loose on the guardians. Additionally, he introduces every boss by describing them to the player, although his monologues always paint the guardians in the worst possible light in a clear attempt to make the player/Rider *want* to fight them. He also tries to shield Rider from viewpoints that might contradict his own, warning Rider to not listen to the guardians who might try to dissuade him from acting violently. While The Voice is incredibly quick to assure Rider that they “are in this together,” his faux friendliness barely masks his callousness as he is overtly manipulative and it is clear that he’d do anything to escape the prison including teaming up with Rider, despite him being fully aware of how dangerous he is.
- **The Hand** – One of the most significant guardians in the story, The Hand is a noble knight equipped with high tech armor and a blazing green sword. He’s formidable, heroic, and, in a more typical story, he’d be the protagonist. The Hand was also the commander of the group originally responsible for capturing Rider. This past triumph makes The Hand overly confident that he will be able to best him again despite being alone this time. This is because The Hand believes that a warrior is only as strong as his cause and while he fights to protect his family, The Hand believes that Rider has no such noble purpose.
- **The Song** – Prior to The Song’s introduction, all the guardians are quick to attack Rider either to indulge in their animalistic natures or because they genuinely believe he needs to be stopped, but The Song is different. She does not look like a warrior or a monster. Instead, she is portrayed as an angelic and calming presence who would rather find a peaceful resolution with Rider than fight him. The Voice warns Rider that she is untrustworthy and that she would say anything in order to trick him into ending his rampage towards freedom, but considering The Voice’s goals are diametrically opposed to The Song’s it is unclear if her kindly personality is indeed an act.
- **The Beat** – The Beat is the final guardian in the game, the last obstacle that stands between Rider and his freedom. She is by far the youngest guardian and she looks the part. Her warm winter attire and her hockey stick weapon make her look like a teenager going to play a game, but despite this she remains confident in her ability to contain Rider who she considers to be a monster. She earnestly believes she will succeed where everyone else has failed, hence why she volunteered to be the last line of defense. According to The Voice, she is only a foolish child who doesn’t understand the responsibility she’s undertaken and he remarks that she never should have been allowed to join the guardians at all.

Breakdown

Since Furi is a boss rush, there is little room for exploration. However, the game's story can gradually be pieced together from dialogue and the environment as you progress throughout each fight. With this in mind, here is a breakdown of the fights that are most important to the story and why.

The game begins with Rider, rendered immobile by his extensive restraints, being brutally beaten by the first guardian. That is until his sadistic captor moves out of the room for a moment and The Voice inexplicably appears in front of Rider. The Voice wastes no time in freeing Rider and encouraging that he exact his vengeance on his nearby tormentor, whom Rider promptly cuts down albeit without displaying any semblance of emotion. Then Rider continues his rampage across the islands leaving the player to piece together the narrative from what they can observe such as a ruined city destroyed in a single impact, a disturbed frogman who blames Rider for his abominable appearance, and an old man who warns against a mysterious shadow on the sun's surface.

There is then a turning point in the narrative when Rider confronts The Hand, as up to this point the slew of guardians the player has encountered have mostly been sadistic, rabid, and vitriolic so there is no moral quandary when it comes to fighting them. The Hand is different. He is a father and a warrior, someone who fights for loftier, more heroic ideals than the player character. Rider has shown no such convictions and we have no idea if he even has any emotions or if he is driven forward by a base instinct to be free. In the face of The Hand's unflinching courage and willingness to do good, it dawns on the player that this game is a rare instance in which some antagonists act heroic while the player character behaves more like a monster.

But since the player character has to win eventually as long as the player doesn't give in, Rider overpowers The Hand and makes an orphan of his son. To his credit, Rider spares his fallen foe a glance that could be generously interpreted as remorse before continuing, perhaps letting on that he does feel something even if wasn't enough to stop him.

After besting The Hand, The Voice tells Rider not to feel guilty because if The Hand truly loved his son he would never have brought him here. The Voice then nervously warns Rider against listening to any promises made by the next guardian, known as The Song. This leaves the player conflicted as The Voice describes The Song as self-interested and manipulative, two qualities he himself obviously embodies.

When we first see The Song she is sitting serenely on a bench in the midst of her gorgeous paradisiac biome, making no attempt to harm Rider. Instead, she offers Rider and the player an alternative to the game's inherently violent nature. She implores that you stop all the killing and that you stay with her forever, in her beautiful cage where you will never want for companionship. If you stay with her for around five minutes, the game will end and the credits will roll. You won't uncover the truth behind Rider's backstory and your save file will be overwritten, but you will have peace.

However if the allure of discovering Rider's origins is too appealing for the player, then the game continues with a boss fight against The Song that ultimately ends with her demise. Rider does noticeably hesitate before landing the killing blow, this time showing unmistakable remorse, which is gleefully pointed out by The Voice who remarks that, "It gives me[The Voice] hope."

As a reward for ignoring the peaceful route, the player finally gains some information about the man who's been helping them the entire time. Instead of a guardian waiting to fight on the next island, there is only The Voice. He tells Rider that he needn't worry about the 7th guardian although the way he speaks strongly implies that not only did he used to be the guardian of this island, but he was also the architect of the prison and by extension, of Rider's suffering. He goes on to explain that the prison separated him from his daughter and that not knowing if she was safe drove him mad to the point that he'd let Rider out regardless of the consequences for anyone else if it meant seeing her again. This revelation simultaneously makes him empathetic and even more reprehensible.

Then, after a few more intense battles Rider finally reaches the last guardian, The Beat. As the last few fights have been incredibly difficult, it is only natural that the player would be excited to finally earn Rider's freedom with one last showdown against another lightning quick, vicious, expert warrior.

The Beat isn't any of those things.

She isn't particularly fast or strong. Her use of technological weaponry against Rider feels paltry, almost pitiable in comparison to the guardians who preceded her. She is every bit the inexperienced, naive ideologue The Voice described. This is especially driven home by the uniquely interactive aspect of the medium as the fight starts relatively easy and ends insultingly so. This is an uncommon narrative beat as most other games would never make the last battle purposefully one of the easiest. The last phase of The Beat's boss fight consists of her crawling around pathetically trying to stop Rider and when the player finally lands the killing blow there is no sense of triumph or accomplishment. All the tension and energy from the previous fights has utterly evaporated; all that remains is the cold comfort that Rider is finally free.

Strongest Element

Furi is a challenging game. It can be incredibly frustrating and multiple times throughout my first playthrough I promised myself that I was done playing the game forever. But I always came back. Why? For the same reason I chose to kill The Song. I *had* to know who Rider was. The little tidbits of dialogue given by The Voice and the various bosses were so engrossing that despite my annoyance at times, I was always drawn back into the game. When The Voice mentions that the ruined city you are trekking through was destroyed in a single impact, you want to know how and why. Is that why the guardians hate Rider, why he's imprisoned? Well, the only way to find out is to soldier on and beat the next guardian. The way the game's mystery hooks the player in expertly prevents any ludonarrative dissonance from occurring in the story. Rider is sick of dying repeatedly just as I'm sick of losing, but together we endure because I want to see the story's secrets unveiled just as badly as he wants to be free.

Unsuccessful Element

An interesting element of the game that is not utilized to the fullest is that Rider is an immortal being. As long as Rider has the will to endure, the guardians can only hope to keep him at bay, while he rises endlessly to fight once again, each time slightly more proficient than before. This could be an intriguing commentary on how "dying" has little impact on players outside of an inconvenience, whereas it is life or death for the game's boss characters.

Unfortunately, when a player gets a game over all they hear is a generic line from The Voice (that they will hear many times) and upon hitting retry, the boss fight restarts as if it is the first time it happened. The feeling of Rider's frightening inevitability is not as present as it should be. If there were scenes of the bosses "killing" Rider, followed by his body grotesquely spasming back to life when the player hits retry he would appear much more menacing.

Additionally, this feeling is also diminished by the bosses repeating the same lines at the exact same moments in every attempt, which makes everything feel scripted and reminds players that these characters are not real people. If their dialogue changed based on how many times they had fought Rider and based on how well the player was doing compared to the last attempt, it would not only be less immersion breaking, but the player would have an easier time empathizing with the bosses' fear of being overwhelmed by an unrelenting threat.

Highlight

The best moment in the game's narrative comes right after The Beat's death when the door to the outside world finally opens. As the credits begin to roll, the player is at long last free to walk around the planet they spent the entire game fighting towards. It's a beautiful land with vast verdant fields and quaint stone structures. And as you take your first steps out into this brave new world the plants begin to wither around you, the ground cracks at your feet, and the buildings change to a sickly pallor when you walk by.

The deaths of all the guardians were so the player could uncover this terrible secret.

You are a Rider, a herald of the apocalypse and everywhere you roam the world dies.

Critical Reception

While reviews about Furi typically focus on the gameplay, when reviewers do mention the story it is incredibly divisive with critics either loving it or hating it. For example, Noah Buttner of the website Dualshockers praised the game for having a meaningful story utilizing a silent protagonist and also highlighted the ending as something that blew him away. In contrast, Nick Whitney of The Digital Twist bemoaned the narrative's vague nature and argued that there shouldn't have been a story reveal after the credits since players could potentially miss it. He and other reviewers also heavily criticized the game for having slow walking sequences in-between fights where much of the story is parceled out to the player, but this aspect was a high point for other reviewers. In summation, Furi's story is not for everyone as it falls flat for some, but it does have an undeniable audience that loves theorizing about the story and characters using the clues hidden amongst the dialogue.

(<https://www.dualshockers.com/furi-review-nintendo-switch-ps4-xbox-one/>)

(<https://www.thedigitalfix.com/gaming/content/7465/furi/>)

Lessons

- One lesson is that using a combination of unreliable narrators and silent protagonists can create a strong story that has the player constantly doubting what is real. Silent protagonists are common in games, but usually they serve as self-insert avatars that need the world explained to them for the player's benefit. Rider is the only character who knows everything that is going on, but is also unable or unwilling to speak. Because of this, players must rely on contrasting accounts from The Voice and the guardians for information, which leaves them constantly wondering what the truth is. Getting to the heart of this mystery can be quite the motivator for players to get through especially difficult parts of the game and serves as the lynchpin for the entire experience.
- Another important lesson is that not everything in a fast-paced game needs to be constant action. In Furi, after every boss fight there is a cooldown period where you slowly walk to the next island while The Voice tells you about who you just beat and who is coming next. It gives the story some room to breathe, gives the player more information about the world, and builds suspense for the coming fights all at the same time.

- Furi also shows us that just because the game follows a silent protagonist, they need not simply be an avatar for the player to insert themselves over. Instead, their actions can give us insight into their personality. For instance, Rider's hesitation towards killing some of the bosses lets the player know he empathizes with some of their causes, but not enough to give up his own and this begins to wear on his conscience. This is most obvious when Rider kills the last guardian. When the door to freedom opens up, Rider is very purposefully turned away from it. Instead, he's transfixed by the body of his fallen foe and doesn't even seem to notice that he's free until The Voice points it out to him. These moments may seem small, but they allow the player to gradually understand Rider without him speaking a single line of dialogue or even altering his expression.

Summation

Furi is an odd choice for a story analysis. At first glance it might seem like the story is nothing more than an excuse to have a bunch of neon warriors brutally murder each other, but it's so much more than that. The unique framing of the story keeps the player engaged as they progress further towards the terrible truth of Rider's origin. Also, despite there being relatively little dialogue throughout the course of the narrative, the motivations and personalities of all the characters are made perfectly clear, with some of them like The Voice proving to be surprisingly nuanced. Even lines that at first seem like cryptic nonsense are completely re-contextualized upon multiple playthroughs. This only adds to the replay value of the game as the player is encouraged to scour through the dialogue with a fine tooth comb to learn more about the world and its guardians. Speaking of the guardians, the fact that they are so entertaining as well as sometimes empathetic, adds so much to not only the fights themselves, but gives the in-game choices real weight. This is ultimately what makes Furi's narrative superior to most other games that pride themselves on their fast-paced action.