

Game Narrative Review



Game Title: Oddworld: Abe's Oddysee

Platform: PlayStation/PC

Genre: Platformer

Release Date: September 19, 1997

Developer: Oddworld Inhabitants

Publisher: GT Interactive

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Lorne Lanning (Writer, Creative Director)

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Overview

Oddworld: Abe's Oddysee is the first in a series of games set in the Oddworld universe. The titular character, Abe, is an enslaved Mudokon, a humanoid species indigenous to Oddworld, who works at a meat-processing plant called Rupture Farms. As profits grow slim, the greedy Glukkons of Rupture Farms unveil a plan to manufacture a new kind of meat product – its own Mudokon workforce. Urged by this horrific discovery, Abe flees for his life, rescuing his fellow enslaved Mudokons along the way. The game chronicles Abe's journey as he unknowingly becomes the savior of his people and ultimately shuts down Rupture Farms for good.

Characters



From left to right, top row: Elum & Abe (mounted), Big Face, Mudokons, Glukkons, Shrykull
Bottom row: Paramite, Slog, Slig, Scrab

Characters:

- **Abe** – The protagonist of the story. He is an unlikely hero who is both clumsy and simpleminded. Abe works as an enslaved but content floor-waxer at Rupture Farms before the night he discovered his employers' wicked plan. Unlike the other Mudokons who have green skin, Abe was born with a bluish pigmentation, already setting him apart as the hero of his people. As a Mudokon, Abe has the psychic ability to possess other living beings through ritual chanting. His Glukkon employers stitched his mouth shut at birth in order to prevent this psychic power, but the stitches have since come loose. As he flees for his life, Abe soon learns of his destiny to “restore the lost land” as it was before widespread Glukkon industrialism.
- **Molluck** – The primary antagonist and head honcho at Rupture Farms. Molluck is a Glukkon and as typical of his race, values only wealth. He runs the Magog Cartel, the mega-corporation that has influence over much of Oddworld and that operates Rupture Farms amongst other factories. Obsessed with profits, Molluck devotes himself to growing his corporate empire even if it means destroying the natural habitat. Considered handsome by his racial standards, Molluck wears a lavish purple suit that drapes over his entire body where only his feet are visible. He seeks at all costs to kill Abe and prevent him from sabotaging Rupture Farms.
- **Big Face** – The mystical Mudokon shaman and Abe's mentor. He appears at the middle of the story and reveals Abe's destiny of restoring the land. Big Face tests Abe through different trials before imbuing him with the magical power of the Shrykull, the ultimate force that will subvert the Glukkon tyranny once and for all. The Mudokon shamans preserve their people's rich history and serve as

spiritual guides to all Mudokons. “Big Face” wears a large tribal mask, hence the honorific.

Major Races:

- **Mudokons** – Once the native inheritors of Oddworld, the Mudokons have since been driven from their land and forced into slave labor by Glukkons corporations. They were once a proud and spiritual people in tune with their natural home. Now, the remaining pockets of free Mudokons live in an ever-bleak land while more and more of their people slave in Glukkons factories, oblivious of their culture and past.
- **Glukkons** – The Glukkons are the bane of the natural order and represent industrialism in all its negative impacts: destruction of the environment, enslavement of indigenous peoples, and outright unethical business practices all for the sake of profit. They are greedy by nature, valuing only the pursuit of wealth.

Wildlife:

- **Scrabs & Paramites** – Scrabs and Paramites used to be sacred creatures that roamed the wilds of Oddworld before the Glukkons came along and nearly harvested them all into extinction. They have claw-like protrusions in the place of recognizable faces and walk on pointy finger-like legs. As wild animals, they are deadly and attack on sight.
- **Elum** – A mule creature who is Abe’s companion in the wilderness outside Rupture Farms. He serves as Abe’s loyal mount in the quest to liberate the Mudokon people.

Others:

- **The Shrykull** – A half-Scrab, half-Paramite deity in the Mudokon pantheon, worshipped as a dualistic god. With Big Face’s guidance, Abe harnesses the power of the Shrykull late in the game and can transform into the god for a short period to destroy surrounding enemies with a blast of lightning.

Breakdown

Abe’s Oddysee follows the classical myth structure as laid out in Joseph Campbell’s “Hero’s Journey” (1949) and tells the story of an unlikely klutz who finds himself thrust into a greater purpose beyond his own immediate goal of escape. Abe’s call, rise, and return are consistent with the Hero’s Journey and every aspect of the game is rife with symbols analogous to this narrative structure. For example, when Abe finally escapes from Rupture Farms, he falls off a cliff and dies. However, Big Face resurrects him before putting him through two tests in the sacred lands of Paramonia and Scrabania – symbolizing the death of a nobody and rebirth as a hero.

Another example is when Abe forges through the spiritual trials in Paramonia and Scrabania, proving his will and capacity as a hero and growing strong enough to summon

the power of the Shrykull. The Shrykull, the hero's reward for proving his worth, is important in that it signifies a major turning point in the game. In the first half of the game, players lack weapons and act the part of an escaped slave by avoiding enemies and hiding in the shadows. After receiving the Shrykull, however, players act the part of a returned hero and finally have the opportunity to directly kill enemies and be on the offensive. The parallel growth between player and player character demonstrates an exemplary fusion of narrative and gameplay.

There is a minor addition in the opening cutscene of the game that reveals more than the developers may have intended. When Abe introduces Rupture Farm's variety of meat products, he rubs his stomach and says "Mmmm." Abe obviously enjoyed the taste of Scrab and Paramite meat, unaware at this point that they are endangered species. However, it is very likely that after he learns of the sacred nature of these animals, Abe stops viewing them as food. With newfound respect for Scrabs and Paramites and choosing not to eat them anymore, Abe leaves behind his past and changes for the better.



Developers wrote Abe's story to give narrative purpose to the gameplay, but the epic plot, relevant themes, and symbols in literature of *Abe's Oddysee* are not its standout elements. The story merely follows a traditional Hollywood formula (the hero's quest). However, what does stand out in *Abe's Oddysee* is the developers' method of telling the story through the environment.

The game does very well in translating game mechanics into suitable narrative elements in the game world. For instance, because the game lacks a HUD, it delivers critical information through the world: bird portals are the level "goals", number of rescued Mudokons is the "high score", meat grinders and electrical fields are the "platforming hazards." Players do not see Oddworld through a game lens; they see it directly because no HUD pollutes the screen. Every object populating the screen has a place and purpose in the story, rather than just being pieces for gameplay. As a result, *Abe's Oddysee* feels less like just a game and more like an intersection between game and narrative.

Players can also interact with the characters on screen through the game's custom AI system called A.L.I.V.E. For example, Paramites run away when they are alone but attack if they are in groups. Scrabs chase the player but will stop to fight other Scrabs. These situations offer more than just gameplay but also narrative insight into Oddworld – players learn that Paramites are pack animals, and that Scrabs are territorial animals. A.L.I.V.E. also features Gamespeak in which Abe utters simple phrases like "hello" or "follow me" to elicit appropriate responses. The impressive range of vocal interactions adds player buy-in to the narrative. The AI system proves that story is not just about plot, but also about involvement in the world.

Strongest Element

Abe's Oddysee engages players in its narrative by relying purely on its environments to tell the story, as the game largely ignores the use of text or dialogue to progress the plot. Cut scenes are minimal and when they do occur, are punchy and to the point. The detailed landscapes depict the depth of the game world, and as such, Oddworld feels alive with stories. Players can feel the plight of the Mudokons as they journey across Rupture Farms, seeing the guards beating the slave workers and the deadly hazards of an unregulated workplace (meat grinders, crushers, and electrical fields). Players can also feel the liberation of the wilds, seeing the Scrabs, Paramites, and Mudokons roam their natural habitat free from the penned walls of Glukkon factories.

Unsuccessful Element

There are two possible endings in the game—the good ending and the bad ending. If players rescue fifty or more of the ninety-nine Mudokons from Rupture Farms, then they get the good ending in which a circle of chanting Mudokons psychically destroy Molluck and save Abe from certain death, allowing his return home to a large, cheering crowd. If, however, players rescue less than fifty Mudokons, then they get to watch a group of angry Mudokons choose to do nothing and let Molluck execute Abe in a meat grinder.

The intention behind making two different endings is clear—to emphasize the importance of freeing Mudokon slaves, rather than straight escape. But the game narrative falls short when it only provides two black-and-white endings. The issue becomes obvious when players rescue forty-nine Mudokons (that is one less than the fifty required) and still get the bad ending. In the bad ending, the angry Mudokons call Abe a “shmuck” and run their fingers across their throats as if Abe is the enemy of their people. This expressed anger undermines Abe’s heroic quest and undermines the feat of rescuing forty-nine slaves. Rescuing forty-nine slaves does not deserve the same ending as rescuing only one.

The original bad ending would have made sense if players saved only one to ten Mudokons—it depicts the consequences of Abe’s selfishness and disregard for his brethren. The developers should have added a third ending for players that saved less than half but more than ten Mudokons. It would not be the victory ending, but it would not slap players in the face for at least finishing the game either—more of a congratulations and “thanks for trying.”

Highlight

The crowning moment of the game comes at the end when a bolt of psychic lightning zaps Molluck and disintegrates his lavish purple suit, revealing what is underneath. Glukkons always appeared with full armless suits in the game, but players might have thought nothing of it other than it being an art decision (since all creatures in Oddworld looked “odd” and alien). The ending dispels the mystery as players finally discover the true nature of the Glukkons – they are frail creatures with shriveled legs that instead walk on their hands. It reinforces the idea of Glukkons enslavement because they lack the proper appendages to do any work on their own. The discovery reveals another side to their people and raises further questions—what were the Glukkons like before they lost proper use of their hands and became ruthless tyrants?



Critical Reception

Abe's Oddysee received an aggregate score of 88 on GameRankings and critics generally agree that the presentation of the game world is one of the most well done aspects of the game.

Greg Sewart of Gaming Age gave the game a 97, stating that the game “represents one of the first successful meetings of Hollywood and Silicon Valley” because the “collection of puzzles combined flawlessly to form a cohesive and interesting story line.”

Tom of Absolute Playstation gave the game a 90, stating, “the world and story line is so exquisitely done that I just couldn't help but get drawn into Abe's fantastically odd world.”

Joe Fielder of GameSpot gave the game an 84, stating that the AI “goes a long way toward making you feel as if you're interacting with an actual world and all its inhabitants.”

Lessons

- Player action invariably links with the narrative, for logical consistency. Story and gameplay must support each other. Every action in *Abe's Oddysee* has a reason behind it. No health bar means death is real and absolute. Rescuing Mudokons means the liberation of Abe's people. Level progression means escaping from certain doom. The Shrykull's offensive ability means Abe's growth as a true hero.
- “Story” is not just about plot progression. “Story” includes world building. *Abe's Oddysee's* Hollywood production-quality visuals and overarching plot combine to create a strong, cohesive arrangement.
- Show only bits and pieces of the world, in order to hint at its greater myth and lore. Show that there is more to discover. The unfamiliar but enchanting atmosphere of Oddworld bursts with storytelling potential and paves the way for its sequels.

Summation

Abe's Oddysee is the type of game that does not completely rely on cut scenes to present its story. The environments in *Abe's Oddysee* tell the story without text or dialogue, but through player buy-in and immersion in the game world. This method of conveying narrative proves the effectiveness of detailed game environments, as evidenced by the favorable audience reaction. More than a decade later, the depth of Oddworld still fuels its intrigue.