

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Barkley, Shut Up and Jam: Gaiden, Chapter 1 of the Hoopz Barkley SaGa

Platform: Windows 7/Vista/XP, Mac OS X

Genre: RPG

Release Date: January 22, 2008

Developer: Tales of Game's Studios

Publisher: Tales of Game's Studios

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: uncertain

Overview

Barkley, Shut Up and Jam: Gaiden tells the story of a hard-boiled Charles Barkley fighting to protect his son Hoopz from the dangers of the post-cyberpocalypse while running from his own painful memories. Twelve years have passed since basketball was outlawed, a violent event known as The Great B-ball Purge or B-Ballnacht. Thousands of basketball stars and fans were massacred in this Ballocaust, and now ball culture survives in the hearts of the scattered remains of the NBA. Former ball stars live in hiding or under surveillance due to one jam that devastated New York City: The Chaos Dunk. Charles Barkley bears responsibility for this tragedy, swearing to live so that no one should see another Chaos Dunk.

The year is 2053 when the power of the Chaos Dunk revisits Neo New York, killing 15 million people and destroying Manhattan. Barkley takes the blame for a second b-ball catastrophe, and Hoopz disappears in the confusion. Michael Jordan leads B.L.O.O.D.M.O.S.E.S agents on a raid of Barkley's apartment, but the accused-terrorist Ultimate Hellbane rescues Charles and takes the story further down the rabbit hole. The two embark on a journey to clear Barkley's name and save the world, and perhaps even b-ball, from the power of the Chaos Dunk.

Characters

- Charles Barkley – Player-character and real-life basketball star. After losing his wife Maureen and the sport he loved to one fateful Chaos Dunk, Barkley was changed forever. Left to raise his son Hoopz in the darkness of the post-cyberpocalypse, Barkley is burdened with tremendous guilt and an abrasive, cynical attitude. Determined to prevent another Chaos Dunk and forge a brighter future for his son, Barkley is at times irritated with the ridiculous obstacles and diversions between him and victory. Never breaking the fourth wall, Charles doesn't question writing a poem for an anthropomorphic snail man, he simply reviles it. Barkley's attitude shapes the tone of the narrative, and forms a brilliant juxtaposition with the game's satirical message.
- Balthios James – Zauber-wielding octoroon great-grandson of LeBron James. Balthios appears at first to us as a simple b-ball enthusiast, but the cloaked octoroon has another secret identity; the Ultimate Hellbane. A well-versed b-ball scholar, Balthios guides Barkley through their bizarre quest and often serves as the voice of reason.

- The Cyberdwarf – Extraterrestrial visitor from a world of dwarves. Upon entering Earth's atmosphere, the Cyberdwarf's vessel caught fire and made a crash landing. The Cyberdwarf was rescued from the wreck and taken to a hospital, but the dwarf's skin was irreparably damaged. A skin donor could not be found, so instead the dwarf received a new hide of basketball hide. The Cyberdwarf is the keeper of a prophecy regarding Hoopz Barkley, regarding Hoopz as “the one”.
- Hoopz Barkley – Charles Barkley's son and baller of prophecy. Hoopz provides a child's naïve insight into the absurd events unfolding before the player, and at times he urges the stubborn Charles onward through ridiculous obstacles. Though an innocent child in demeanor, Hoopz's weapon of choice is the handgun.
- Vinceborg 2050 – Killed in the Great B-Ball Purge, Vince Carter was rebuilt as a cyborg. When Barkley finds his lost friend, the cyborg does not recognize Charles at first. Suffering from some memory loss, Vinceborg occasionally blurts out the names of people he remembers, joining the party with the hope that they can discover his purpose. Vince responds to Hoopz's name, as well as mentions of the prophecy that Hoopz is meant to fulfill. Not until the party finds Hoopz a hostage of Michael Jordan does Vinceborg realize his true purpose; to destroy the baller of prophecy, “the one”. Vinceborg turns cloak immediately to ally with Jordan, and the two assault the party.
- Michael Jordan – Recurring antagonist, former NBA superstar. Few b-ball stars were spared in the Great B-Ball Purge, but instead of choosing a life of hiding or shame, Jordan chose to join the oppressors as a kind of sports gestapo. As an investigator, the former Bulls star pursues Barkley with snide remarks and a vindictive spirit. For all his Javert-esque approaches, however, Jordan is in league with the terrorist group B.L.O.O.D.M.O.S.E.S. The powers he serves would see the world Chaos Dunked out of existence, but Jordan doesn't appear to share this ambition wholeheartedly. As Jordan and Barkley clash throughout the game, the two suggest their bitter relationship on the courts of old. In their final confrontation, Jordan reveals his true motivation: “This meeting between you and I is the culmination of thousands of years of b-ball. This is b-ball in all it's glory, this is the final game! It's just you and me, Barkley. No refs. No whistles. No rules. Just you, me, and Sweet Georgia Brown.”

Breakdown

While *Barkley* may be the best basketball RPG out there, the game is nothing if not a platform for some of the heaviest satire in the medium. *Barkley* is the ultimate RPG parody. I cannot provide even hyperbole to describe how much this game covers in its short duration. To say that *Barkley* merely uses tropes would be a gross understatement; TvTropes.org lists that *Barkley* employs over 150 different tropes to magnify the hilarity. *Barkley* pokes fun at both Japanese and Western RPGs, as well as even the platform the game is built on. Taking its convoluted plot completely seriously, *Barkley* delivers a brand of comedy that provokes not only laughter but for players to stick along for the full ride.

Barkley is simply bursting with pop-culture references as well as a serious spread of basketball icons. Any game can take a fun theme and run with it, but *Barkley* commits. Whether you're a diehard fan or merely a witness to basketball, the game simply wouldn't feel right without an encounter with the ghost of Dikembe Mutombo. Every morsel counts. As *Barkley* builds its world before you, the plot

to *Space Jam* suddenly becomes important and the jokes transform. Bill Cosby perishes in an accident at the Spalding laboratories, to later haunt the world as the Ghost Dad, but it's not just a fleeting passing chuckle. *Barkley's* humor isn't just in the game, it *is* the game.

Beneath the bumpy orange surface, *Barkley* is much a joke of itself. Though not weak for gameplay, *Barkley* implements jury-rigged quick time events and useless “use this, take this, examine this, search this” sections as a jab at both modern and aging game constructs. The game follows a classic JRPG “story on rails” system and a matching combat system to complete the facade. The popular Japanese game company Square-Enix finds itself in *Barkley* under the oppressive identity of Square-Enix-Goya, a corporation that bears some resemblance to Shinra Electric Power Company in Square's well-known title *Final Fantasy VII*. *Barkley* even goes as far as to mock fans of such games at every save point. To save their game, the player must brave a tirade delivered by a floating truck pump, each time a different rant in the form of a forum reply message. Truckpump is ruthless, wielding the most condescending language to bash anyone who dares claim to enjoy western games, and declaring at every opportunity the superiority of glorious Nippon.

Strongest Element

For all that *Barkley* satirizes, the game maintains an identity all its own. Moments like finding out that there is a B-Ball Valhalla are common, and tension rises around every boss fight. The game promises memorable moments, and it delivers. Vinceborg's betrayal, Wilford Brimley's sacrifice and Michael Jordan's last game are as cheesy as it gets, but each one is so well executed that it's easy to forget that they're all just painted tropes. Though it may be a Frankenstein's monster, *Barkley* lives.

Unsuccessful Element

This may sound like the interview answer “My greatest weakness is that I work too hard”, but *Barkley* suffers at the hands of that which it parodies. The very weaknesses in JRPG story telling that the game presents can actually be a detriment to the story at times. Side-stories and focus on supporting characters serve the purpose of variety, but I was about as fed up as *Barkley* whilst writing a poem for the snail-man. Moments such as Cyberdwarf's matchmaking service date and leading the duergar rebellion against their genie masters felt too disconnected from the main story for me to really engage, which in all likelihood was completely intentional.

Highlight

The final moments of *Barkley* are without a doubt the best part of the game. The setting: derelict space ziggurat Necron 7. After a one-on-one fight to the death with Michael Jordan to the tune of *Sweet Georgia Brown*, our heroes confront the ultimate menace. The shadowy evil that has been working against them the whole time? The unnamed force that dunked Manhattan into oblivion? Shadow *Barkley*. The greyscale *Barkley* with bright red eyes lets our heroes in on his plan and his origins (explained via *Space Jam*) before asking Charles to join him in world domination. The choice is given to the player, one of the precious few in the game. Is it really a choice? I'm the player, and the answer is that it's time to slam jam.

The fight wouldn't be complete without multiple phases, of course announced by Shadow *Barkley*. The foe is of equal strength with *Barkley*, however and whatever small victory the player achieves is for naught. Charles *Barkley* instructs the Cyberdwarf and Balthios to escape with Hoopz through an escape pod as he prepares one final jam to end his evil mirror. As Balthios holds off the entire team of Monstars (*Space Jam*), the Cyberdwarf escorts Hoopz off the ziggurat just as *Barkley*

performs one final Chaos Dunk. The ensuing cutscene depicts the b-ball hero front-flip into space before careening back to Necron 7 as a public advisory warning scrolls across the scene. Barkley's dunk explodes in thermonuclear devastation as Hoopz and the Cyberdwarf look on from the safety of an escape pod.

Critical Reception

Barkley is something of a cult-hit, but what few reviews exist are generally positive, and most focus on the game's unique brand of humor. To quote PC Gamer: “Barkley, Shut Up and Jam: Gaiden is absolutely *insane*.” Peter Parrish isn't alone in his criticism of the game's platform, citing odd bugs and aberrations in Game Maker. On the whole however, *Barkley* is lauded for its writing and flavor, easily the game's strong suit.

Lessons

- There's no pan like dead-pan. To include a joke is one thing, to *implement* one is another thing entirely. *Barkley* works because of its commitment its satirical world.
- Even building a story out of clichés and trope, it is possible to make something authentic. Aside from its theme, *Barkley* does nothing new. The story could be considered a mashing of different compatible parts to make a *Hero's Quest*, but not once does it present its origins as clearly as its humor.

Summation

Barkley dares. *Barkley* commits. *Barkley* succeeds. It's the most serious “joke game” out there, and for that it maintains its own identity. Such a hodge-podge of themes could not work without brilliant execution. The oblivious character of Charles Barkley frees the developers to jape as they please, without fear of disrupting the story's flow. Keeping the game serious keeps the player immersed. As long as Barkley sticks to his world, so does the player. When the world is a joke, the player is immersed in laughter. This careful balance is incredible important, as any comedian will tell you: “It's all in the delivery.”