

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Bastion

Platform: PC, XBOX 360, iOS

Genre: Action/Adventure

Release Date: July 20, 2011

Developer: SuperGiant Games

Publisher: Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment

Game Writers/Creative Directors/Narrative Designers: Amir Rao, Greg Kasavin

Overview

A beautiful, lively fantasy world torn asunder by an apocalyptic event known only as the Calamity sets the scene for *Bastion*. As one of the few survivors of the event, the player takes the place of "The Kid," who must find other survivors, friend or foe; resurrect the Bastion, the emergency safe haven; and learn the cause of the Calamity. The Kid's effort to resurrect the Bastion sends him far and wide to collect Cores and Shards, powerful crystals that the Bastion uses for power. Along the way, the player meets Rucks, a man who seems to know a little too much about the Bastion. Rucks provides narration during gameplay, his smooth, raspy voice mirroring the rustic themes of the game. As the Kid progresses, he learns more about the world, the various nations and clans, and their roles in the Calamity. The player will meet the Caelondians, the Kid's kin; the Ura, their longtime rivals; the Mancers, the technological masters of the land, and many others. *Bastion's* story is lasting and engaging primarily due to its deep, satisfying plot, its unique take on character development, and the manner in which it frames these elements within the gameplay.

Characters

(To be written later.)

Breakdown

At a first glance, *Bastion* may appear to be a cartoonish hack-and-slash adventure game in the same vein as *Diablo*. However, *Bastion* separates itself from others in its genre with excellent narrative and storytelling. With its great plot, interesting characters, and its focus on immersion, *Bastion* is a story to be remembered.

Bastion begins *in medias res*, as the Kid wakes on a floating island in the midst of the post-apocalyptic world. Navigating through twisted streets and floating rubble, he finds the Bastion, a safe

haven where Caelondians were to take refuge “in case of trouble.” He also meets Rucks, who informs the Kid that since nobody except them arrived at the Bastion, the Kid would need to find Cores to power the Bastion while they look for survivors. As the Kid travels farther in search of the Cores, he learns more of the world, as well as the causes of the Calamity. As revelations about both these points are revealed, a network of conspiracies, betrayals, and wartime tensions deepens and heightens the plot up to a satisfying climax. The zenith of the game contains a message about the inhumanity of war, which is bolstered by the previous events in the game. Overall, *Bastion’s* plot ramps up very nicely from a small, focused story about the Kid to a larger narrative about a war between two nations.

The characters in *Bastion* can be counted on one hand, but the interactions between them are the primary focus of the game’s narrative. Each character in *Bastion* is unique in several ways. For instance, the Kid is a silent protagonist, yet he still has plenty of personality through Rucks’ description of him, as well as the player’s own choices while playing as him. Rucks himself offers a different kind of narration, as he is not quite as omnipotent nor as perfect as he seems at the beginning. He relies on the Kid for all of his information about the events, sure, but his own retelling of them is often clouded by his own emotion. The result is a kind of narration that creates much dramatic irony, especially near the end. Zulf’s role in the story is also worth considering. After his rage-induced destruction of the Bastion after learning of the evils of Caelondia, Zulf becomes a tragic anti-villain. Without Zulf, *Bastion’s* message about the darkness of war would be much more vague and impersonal.

Bastion’s reliance on immersion takes the story from an intriguing tale to a haunting experience. *Bastion* is indeed immersive for several reasons. The Kid, as a silent protagonist, is easy for the player to project onto. One problem with silent protagonists, though, is that they often seem uninteresting compared to the other characters in the story. *Bastion* averts this problem by giving the Kid his characterization through Rucks’ dialogue. As a result, the Kid feels like a believable character because he is an extension of the player. The story is heavily driven by the Kid’s actions, so it feels like the player drives the story, instead of the other way around. In a linear game with a non-branching plot, this is quite the feat.

Bastion is a very effective example of interactive storytelling, as it merges gameplay and narrative together very well, without either having to stretch to accommodate the other. It is this quality that makes *Bastion* the experience it is.

Strongest Element

(To be completed later.)

Unsuccessful Element

Unfortunately, *Bastion* lacks quite a bit in the exposition for several reasons. For instance, *Bastion’s* world is so different that I didn’t actually realize that an apocalypse had happened until about halfway through. I took the floating islands and vistas of the world below as part of the magical nature of Caelondia instead of the remnants of the broken world. The exposition also does a poor job of setting up the main conflict of the game, as the Caelondia-Ura tensions aren’t properly explained until about

halfway into the game. Finally, the exposition is very slow compared to the rest of the game, and the narrative is somewhat dry in a few parts.

The exposition could have been improved in a few ways. First of all, a view of Caelondia before the Calamity, or perhaps of the Calamity itself, could have made it clear that *Bastion's* world is indeed post-apocalyptic. Some foreshadowing of the greater war, or at least an introduction to the nations involved, would also have been welcome. Finally, moving the encounter with Zia to a little earlier in the game would have allowed the story to progress somewhat more evenly.

Highlight

The pinnacle of *Bastion's* take on interactive storytelling comes at the climax of the game, the Kid's final encounter with the Ura army. After what seems to be a final boss fight, the narrator remarks that the Ura "can't be happy [the Kid] followed Zulf all the way home." Indeed, the Kid finds Zulf being attacked by the Ura. The Ura quickly leave, and the player must decide what to do with Zulf. The player's decision depends entirely upon how he or she sees Zulf. If the player sees Zulf as a traitor or a coward, he or she may leave Zulf for dead. The Kid is then treated to a secondary boss fight, where he must fight his way through the last remaining portion of the Ura army with a powerful battering ram. The fight feels satisfying, as the player's wrath toward Zulf is then turned toward the rest of the Ura.

The player has another option, however. If he or she feels that Zulf can be forgiven, he or she can choose to drop the battering ram and instead pick up Zulf. The Kid cannot use any weapons while carrying Zulf, and he moves very slowly. Instead of fighting the Ura army, all the Kid can do is to walk through them. They open fire immediately, and as the player blows through all of his or her health potions, it appears that the battle is hopeless. Once the Kid is within an inch of his life, however, the Ura realize who the Kid is carrying, and slowly, one by one, they stop firing. One lone soldier continues firing long after everyone else does; he is quickly slashed down by his commander. The Ura, seeing how the Kid has forgiven Zulf, decide to forgive the Kid in kind.

Regardless of the player's choice, Rucks builds up an excellent amount of dramatic irony with only a few lines. He says, "I can see it now; the Kid in one corner, Zulf in the other. Ain't much of a fight. Don't you worry, though. Once the Bastion is restored, it'll be all right." Depending on the player's choice, this statement could be taken one of two ways. If the player abandons Zulf and has to fight his way through the Ura, the first line means that the narrator thinks the Kid will easily overpower Zulf and the Ura. This is somewhat true; while the Kid doesn't directly fight Zulf, the ensuing fight with the Ura is relatively easy due to the powerful nature of the battering ram. The third line could be taken as a reassuring remark toward Zia, telling her that Zulf will live again once the Bastion is restored. If the player takes Zulf, the first line instead could be taken as the Narrator admitting that the Ura will kill the Kid. The third line, then, means that Rucks is reassuring himself that the Kid will be restored once the Bastion is operational. In those three lines, Rucks sums up the final encounter perfectly, and sets the emotional scene for the ensuing fight.

Critical Reception

Bastion received high praise upon its launch in 2011.

Lessons

There are a multitude of lessons that can be learned from *Bastion*, both in its successes as well as its failures.

- Keep it simple. Good narrative does not require a large amount of characters, nor does it require these characters have deep, complicated backstories. In *Bastion*, nothing is wasted. Almost everything that happens in the game is for a reason, and helps build toward the story's payoff. The result is a tight, focused story.
- The idea of a narrator is almost as old as stories themselves, but allowing them to be a character in the story makes it much more interesting. *Bastion's* narrator is effective because of how the story shapes him, rather than the other way around.
- First impressions are key. *Bastion's* weak first act can sour some of the rest of the experience, and leave the player confused about the central conflict. If the first act had more relevance to the central conflict, it would have been much more interesting.

Summation

(To be completed later.)