

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Child of Light

Platform: Wii U, PC, PS4, Xbox One, PS3, Xbox 360

Genre: RPG

Release Date: April 29, 2014

Developer: Ubisoft Montreal

Publisher: Ubisoft

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Jeffrey Yohalem (Writer), Patrick Plourde (Director)

Overview

The narrative in *Child of Light* is a unique take on the coming of age story. It follows Aurora, the daughter of a duke in Austria, 1895. She dies suddenly one night and her father falls into a deep depression. Aurora is spared from death, however, and she awakes in the magical world of Lemuria. She wishes only to return to her father and wake up from her “dream”. She comes across the Lady of the Forest in a ruined temple who tells Aurora of a mirror that can take her home if she can reclaim the Sun, Moon, and Stars that were stolen from the sky by the Queen of Night. Aurora travels through Lemuria clearing out the dark creatures that serve the Queen of Night and meeting the inhabitants of the land. Upon learning their stories of suffering under the Queen of Night, Aurora decides not just to return home, but to free the inhabitants of Lemuria from oppression. The game shows Aurora’s growth from simply pursuing her own interests to taking responsibility for her friends’ well-being.

Child of Light uses its gameplay mechanics to echo and enhance the themes of growth it wants to convey. As the player gathers more characters into their party it requires more management and planning to use all of their powers together properly. As Aurora takes on more responsibility to the world she finds herself. The player must match that responsibility by learning to use these characters. Each team member’s battle abilities relate to their character and create a desire to resolve their storylines as you play with them more. This important integration of gameplay elements with story makes *Child of Light* stand out in its treatment of game narrative.

Characters

Aurora - Aurora is the main character that players control in and out of battle. She is the young daughter of an Austrian Duke and Duchess. Aurora's mother died shortly after giving her the fake crown she wears, and was raised primarily by her father. One night she dies and awakes in Lemuria. She wants desperately to return home to her father and save him from his despair. The game is her coming of age tale where she learns to accept responsibility and be a good queen.

Igniculus - In the first area of the game Aurora comes across this small firefly that is looking for her. He is an elemental magically brought into the world by the Lady of the Forest to guide Aurora. He is controlled independently of Aurora in the game's overworld, and in battle. He can gather items, solve puzzles, heal party member, and slow down enemies.

The Duke - Aurora's father serves as her main motivation throughout much of the game. He is the Duke of an Austrian island. Prior to the events of the game his wife, Aurora's mother, died. Eventually he took a second wife, Umbra, with two daughters of her own. After Aurora's death the dam keeping the island above water bursts. His despair for Aurora leads him to fall ill and feel as though he can do nothing to save his people. Aurora receives visions of his poor condition and the rising flood waters in Austria serving as her drive to return home.

Lady of the Forest / Queen of Light - The Lady of the Forest is the main quest giver in the beginning who sets Aurora on her journey to save Lemuria. It is she who gives Aurora everything she needs to complete her quest: Igniculus, the power of flight, and a flute. This woman is actually the Queen of Light, and Aurora's mother, making Aurora responsible for the fate of her subjects in both Austria and Lemuria. She left Austria and returned to Lemuria when Umbra's daughters stole the lights from the sky: the Sun, Moon, and Stars. Her love for her people serve as the model for a good queen that Aurora is to become.

Queen of the Night / Umbra - She is the main antagonist in the game. She was banished from Lemuria long ago by the Queen of Light. In exile she sent her daughters to steal the lights from the sky coaxing the Queen of Light back to Lemuria and allowing her to marry the Duke and keep an eye on Aurora believing that she would be the one to overthrow her. She wants to rule Lemuria, but holds disdain for all of its non-human inhabitants. In this way she serves as a foil to the Queen of Light.

Norah / Nox - One of Umbra's daughters, Aurora's step-sister. She is sent by Umbra to join Aurora's party as a mole. Nox ultimately delivers Aurora to Umbra to keep her out of the way of Umbra's conquest of Lemuria. She holds her mother's hatred for the non-humans of Lemuria. Her betrayal shows Aurora's naiveté and innocence and prompts Aurora's growth.

Rubella, Finn, Robert, Tristis, Oengus, and Gen - These characters are all the companions that can be added to Aurora's party if you choose to help them. Each party member is from a

unique race that Umbra brought grief to when she returned to conquer Lemuria. Choosing to help these characters reveals their back story and the story of each race of inhabitant.

Breakdown

Child of Light tells the coming of age story of its protagonist Aurora. Along her journey through the fairytale world of Lemuria, Aurora learns the importance of being active in her responsibilities. By following her growth the game explores the themes of sacrifice for the sake of others, and loss of innocence. The gameplay is a mixture of an active time battle system with puzzle and platforming elements in the overworld. These gameplay elements that require an increasing amount of party management reflect Aurora's own journey as she begins to care more and more about Lemuria and not just her own quest to return home.

The narrative elements are backed up by the game's presentation. The story is told entirely in rhyme. Everything from the expositional cut scenes, basic conversations between characters, to item descriptions follow a rhyme scheme. The environment looks hand painted, and the cut scenes are living stained glass windows. All of this adds to the feeling that you are playing through a fairytale. The game makes full use of this style as the story is predominately moved along through these poetic conversations. There are a few action sequences, but the subtle clues in the environment and talking to characters is how the player must advance the plot.

In addition to the main plot of Aurora's quest home, there are several side quests. These quests are really what establishes a connection to the world. They require the player to help the inhabitants who have been suffering from Umbra's reign over Lemuria. Practically they serve as a way to add new party members. In terms of the narrative however they show the depth and history of the world. Helping the citizens of Lemuria makes it feel more worth saving.

When the Lady of the Forest tasks Aurora with saving Lemuria Aurora sees this as a means to get home, but she does not actually care. She makes it clear to the inhabitants she meets that she is not the princess that will save them, she only wants to go home. One of the first instances of this is when Aurora helps Finn, a Capilli. The Capilli are a race of fast-aging dwarf like creatures turned into crows by Umbra. Upon completing Finn's request for Aurora to kill the evil creatures corrupting a magic well the water frees the Capilli and they praise Aurora as their princess, but she refuses to accept the title. She only helped so they could guide her on her way home. At the bottom of the well Aurora received her first vision of her father. He took ill after Aurora's apparent death. This information invigorates her drive to return to him.

It also pushed the thoughts of saving Lemuria out of her mind. This motivation is solidified when Aurora out of nowhere finds her half-sister Norah after leaving the Capilli village. Norah reiterates just how bad a state Aurora's father is in and just so happens to know where the magic mirror to take them home is on top a high mountain. It all seems too perfect, and it is, but Aurora's innocence at this early stage in the narrative allows her to see past this, blindly trust Norah and ignore the mission she was tasked with.

Aurora's apathy towards her mission is clear when they reach the village of the Bolmus Populi, a town of mice traders that live on a giant who carried them around Lemuria until Umbra immobilized the giant and sealed the Bolmus vaults. Aurora at this point has stopped asking about the Sun and Moon needed to save Lemuria at all, only if they can help her get up the mountain. The Bolmus say they can if Aurora frees the giant from Umbra's curse by killing the creatures that have infected him. Aurora enters the giant's mouth with the love sick Bolmus archer Robert as a guide, and it is here that the player has the first major choice in whether or not to help the inhabitants of Lemuria. The vaults of the Bolmus are inside the giant as well. It is faster to just clear out the spiders and move on, but the player can search a little deeper and open the vaults so the Bolmus can trade again. Norah's against it, as she is disgusted by the Bolmus, which foreshadows her connection to Umbra. There's no real benefit to gameplay, but the narrative has set up a situation where it feels right to help this race of defenseless creatures. Aurora learns and grows as a person here, since it establishes that good leadership is not a quid pro quo arrangement, and helping her subjects when they need it is integral to ruling.

Aurora is mostly blind to this lesson, however until they reach the mountain top Norah told her about. Aurora, without finding the Sun or Moon, is perfectly willing to abandon her friends to Umbra's tyranny if it means that she gets to go home. This is the turning point for Aurora where it is revealed that Norah is actually Nox, Umbra's daughter. It is also revealed that Umbra is Aurora's step-mother and Nox was only there to lead Aurora into a trap. Umbra locks Aurora away so that she cannot be the savior Umbra knows she can be. However, being locked away provides her with the chance to realize the importance of her duties to Lemuria. Her insistence on ignoring the world she found herself in got her locked away in it. Aurora finally is given the motivation she needs to reassemble her team to save Lemuria and grow into the good leader she is meant to be.

Aurora is freed by one of the guards, a Kategida named Oengus, who was coerced into betraying his people to Umbra. It's disarming here as you have built up your own battle strategies with all the party members and now they are ripped away. Oengus leads Aurora to her friends who were captured when Aurora was and they make their escape. Before leaving the prison Oengus leaves the party asking Aurora to go out of her way to help free his clan from Umbra's dungeon. At this point in time the player has formed a strong enough party that you can finish the game without Oengus. The game has created such an emotional attachment between the player and the world that the player feels compelled to help anyway. It shows how the game has masterfully used the narrative and gameplay mechanics to form a bond and align the player's mentality with that of Aurora's growth from selfish girl to champion of her friends.

This growth is soon made explicit with Aurora defeating Umbra's eldest daughter and reclaiming the Moon. Upon doing this Aurora is transformed from a child to an adult. Symbolically, this shows the growth of character Aurora has experienced and the lessons she has learned in Lemuria. From here on out she is fully committed to saving Lemuria and all of its inhabitants. She saves a village beset by an ogre, and reunites a group of elementals. All the while the party

is getting more unique abilities and as such the player has more complex battle strategies to play with. The player has to do more to manage all the members of the party and fight effectively which reiterates Aurora's own development into an active leader and accepting her role as savior of Lemuria.

This change in personality is affirmed at the end of the game. After defeating Nox and reclaiming the Sun Umbra deals Aurora a cheap shot and kills her. The Lady of the Forest, the quest giver, uses the Sun, Moon, and Stars to revive Aurora on the altar where she first woke up there. It is revealed that the Lady is actually the Queen of Light and Aurora's lost mother. She affirms that Aurora has done well and is prepared to take on Umbra. In this way the narrative is brought full circle. Aurora originally awoke on this altar as an innocent, naive, child, but now she awakens as the new Queen of Light ready to succeed her mother. Her mother could have just told her who she was in the beginning, but she wanted Aurora to grow to love Lemuria on her own, and having her travel the continent helping the inhabitants serves that purpose. Aurora would not have learned the lessons she needed to ultimately defeat Umbra had she not gone on her quest around the continent learning to love the land and inhabitants that Umbra hated so much.

Aside from this main storyline there are two other plots that the game explores through hidden pages floating in out of the way places in Lemuria. These collectible pages have part of a poem that tells of the origins of Lemuria up until Umbra and Aurora's mother left Lemuria for Earth. There are also a set of notes by a girl being chased through Lemuria in her search for someone. These stories are expositional at best, but create an even deeper sense of Lemuria as a functioning world. It also reinforces the way the game tells its narrative. The player will get more story out of the game, and as such a deeper connection to it, by putting in more effort. Finding the pages is not easy, and the side quests take the player out of their way, but they add so much to the narrative that they always feel worth it.

Strongest Element

This method of adding to the storyline as a sort of reward for putting more effort into the game helps to keep the player's mindset in line with Aurora's own throughout the narrative. In the beginning Aurora is only focused on getting home. The player has spent so little time in Lemuria that they will adopt that same mindset. The first few sections and side quests are not optional, but as Aurora opens her mind to saving Lemuria more and more the options the player has in how to play the game open up as well. By tying Aurora's emotional changes to the options the player has *Child of Light* creates a deeper emotional connection to the world and Aurora.

Unsuccessful Element

The game commits to having the flow of the game match Aurora's mentality and to bring the player into that same mindset. At the end of the game, however, when Aurora's growth is given affirmation from her mother Aurora is more driven than ever to defeat Umbra and she flies off into the fight with Umbra immediately. This is jarring since before every other boss encounter

there is an area with puzzles that lead up to that fight where the environment and characters add something to the story. With this fight there is no build up, so while it is clearly trying to show the urgency of Aurora's drive at the end of the narrative it makes this last fight feel disjointed from the rest of the game.

Highlight

The turning point for Aurora's character is the highlight of the game. Norah's betrayal and the reveal that Umbra is Aurora's stepmother has the biggest dramatic impact and creates motivation for the player and Aurora in the second half of the game. This is where Aurora decides to fight to save Lemuria, forgoing her journey home. It is also where the game opens the world up for the player the most in terms of choosing whether or not to do side quests. The impact of this scene works to give the player, not just Aurora, the motivation to complete the side quests and discover as much of the story of Lemuria as possible.

Critical Reception

Critical reception has been positive overall. Across the six platforms *Child of Light* was released on the averages range from 74 on the Xbox 360 to 89 on PS3 [4]. Almost all of them talk about the incredible visuals and the interesting gameplay mechanics.

Ryan Taljonick from Gamesradar [2] addresses the narrative directly when he stated that "it keeps you eager to press on and discover why Aurora is seemingly the only hope for Lemuria's future, and how she ended up there in the first place." This is one of the major interpretations in the reviews. The idea that the game's narrative draws you into its mysteries and makes you want to find out more. The other major argument is that it leans too heavily on fairy tale clichés such as the evil step-mother.

Vince Ingenito from IGN [3] stated that he "was often unsure as to whether [he] was headed in the direction [he] was supposed to, and [he] never once cared." This was in regards to the overworld exploration using the power of flight that Aurora is given early on in the game. This free feeling to explore the world helps to draw the player into learning more about the world in the interest of getting the player to want to know more about it.

Esmeralda Portillo at Machinima [1] articulates one of the only elements of the game that is widely complained about when she says that "the entire game is told in rhyme - down to everyone's dialogue - which can sometimes harm the story's flow." Across reviews this aspect of the story is bemoaned the most with a lot of reviewers finding that it didn't allow as much character development for the side characters as there could have been. Others found it charming but most critics thought it was an interesting concept that could have used better execution.

Lessons

- Integrating Gameplay Mechanics with Narrative

- Gameplay mechanics share almost an equal role in presenting the story to the player. They must use the gameplay systems that were designed to advance through the story. It is therefore important that the gameplay enforces the themes that the story is trying to convey. The active time battle combat system requires more attention as Aurora becomes more emotionally connected to Lemuria. The freedom of flight in the overworld encourages the exploration into side quests that develop the story further.
- Archetypes vs. Unique Characters
 - Using recognizable, oft-used archetypes for characters makes it much easier to show who their character is. It is, however, the more unique characters that make a player more invested in the story. For characters that don't go through much development it can be good to use archetypes and focus on the growth of the main characters. Umbra is the evil step-mother who, even though she receives some backstory, has the right amount of development to understand that you should want to dethrone her. Aurora doesn't fall into an archetype. She's a small girl on a quest to return to her father who falls into the role of a savior. Seeing her growth in conjunction with Umbra's stagnation in evil makes the story as a whole more dynamic.
- Effective Use of Down Time
 - Even when the main focus of a game's gameplay is on combat there needs to be equal attention paid to the time between combat. Combat gets repetitive without some context for why you're fighting. Environment, story, puzzles, side quests all serve to break up the combat. In *Child of Light* the beautiful environment and clever, yet simple, puzzles in the overworld encourage its exploration. This builds a rhythm of serene free flying and exploration to fast paced combat and back again. That rhythm helps set the pace of the game and keep a player interested.
- Depth and Length
 - Creating an interesting and deep world for the player to explore does not mean that the game needs to be dauntingly long. A twelve hour experience can be as deep as an eighty hour experience if the proper care is put into building the world just enough for the player to make connections on their own. The lost poems and notes scattered through the world as well as features in the environment suggest a deep long history of Lemuria without actually spelling out every event. The game feels tighter and more manageable without being bogged down with the exposition of some longer and more traditional games in the RPG genre.

Summation

What Ubisoft Montreal has done with *Child of Light* is masterfully tie gameplay mechanics with narrative. Aurora is forced to grow from a selfish child into a good leader during her travels in Lemuria. Her growth is mimicked in the gameplay by how the player is required to invest more

effort into managing their team. This creates such a strong emotional attachment to Aurora's goals that it can affect how the player explores the game's world by creating a desire to complete the subplots of the supporting characters that helped you save Lemuria. The game finds its success in its ability to use all elements of the game to enhance the same central narrative of Aurora becoming a good leader for her subjects in both worlds.

References

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