

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Aether
Platform: PC
Genre: Adventure
Release Date: September 8th, 2008
Developer: Tyler Glaiel
Publisher: Self Published
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Edmund McMillen

Overview

In Aether the player takes control of a lonely boy who, while walking alone one day, encounters a large octopus-like monster. The boy begins to run away, but then turns back, not wanting to offend the monster. The boy climbs atop the monster's head and gazes out into the stars, wondering if there are other people out there as lonely as he is. With that, the boy and the monster set off on a journey through space, using the monster's long tongue to swing from cloud to cloud, and planet to planet.

Characters

The Boy – We don't know too much about the Boy other than that at the beginning of the game he is lonely and has wandered away from home. This actually works to the game's advantage as it allows the player to project themselves onto the Boy. Everyone's felt lonely at some point in their life, so it's easy to sympathize with him. As the Boy travels from planet to planet, players can connect with the people they encounter there through the eyes of the Boy. But players aren't in control of just the Boy, they also play as...

The Monster – We don't know much about the Monster. He (She? It?) appeared one day just as the Boy happened to be walking by and the two are now inseparable. The Monster never actually says anything, preferring instead to use its tongue to swing from the clouds into space.

Breakdown

Aether is about seeing the world from the perspective of a child. So it only makes sense that we examine it as adults.

A lot of Aether's story is purposefully left vague. Even the opening doesn't really tell the player too much. "A lonely boy meets an octopus monster and they go on a space

adventure together” is a pretty fair summary of what we’re told. But if you look at it a bit closer you’ll find that there’s much more to it than meets the eye, a theme common throughout the entire game.

One key element that’s easily overlooked is the Monster and what it represents. When the Boy first encounters the Monster he is feeling lonesome and has left his home to wander by the sea. The Monster then extends a hand (or tentacle if you will) to the Boy. This is the only action that the Monster takes without the Boy. The Monster represents the Boy’s creativity and imagination, a means which offers him the chance to escape and explore his current situation, which we get into later with the individual planets. At first the boy turns to run from the Monster, afraid to embrace his creative side, but he quickly changes his mind once he realizes that this means neglecting the Monster, and a part of himself.

Once the Boy embraces and climbs atop the Monster, he turns to look out at the stars and begins to wonder if there are other lonesome people out there like him-lonesome people that perhaps haven’t embraced Monsters of their own. He then wonders if the people of earth would even care, and this becomes really important once it’s made apparent what the planets and people out there represent.

Once the game starts, the player is allowed to go wherever they want. There is no order in which the player has to visit the planets, nor is there an explicit need to visit the planets, other than a few icons that indicate the direction that they’re in. Should the player wish, they may simply travel through space, exploring the Boy’s “limitless imagination” here represented by randomly generated space that literally goes on forever. However while flying through space aimlessly can certainly be fun, the planets that the player can visit make up the meat of the game and are where we will be spending most of our time.

The first planet that the player encounters is Earth, which they start on. Earth is completely barren, with no other characters on it. Its one defining feature is a small house and some trees that the player can see in the background as they walk around the planet. All of the planets in Aether share a few common elements: a face on the planet, a puzzle, a moon, and inhabitants. Earth is the only planet that doesn’t have any inhabitants and this can be seen as a more literal representation of the Boy’s loneliness. Even the moon is empty, with only its smile and a few craters to show. The Earth too has a large smile but this changes throughout the game.

We’ll return to earth later but for now let’s venture to another planet.

Gravida is an interesting planet whose residents appear to be infatuated with death. On the surface of the planet the player can encounter several small bird-like creatures and a large hippo-like creature who tells the player, “Sometimes my stomach hurts” and “I’ll be happy when I’m dead”. Similarly on the moon there’s a small blob-like creature who says, “I’m cool cause I’m dead” as well as “My feet itch...” Furthermore the planets face has its eyes crossed out, with its mouth gaping open on the surface. If the player jumps into the mouth of the planet they’ll find the interior of the planet: a cave filled with

crystals and another small bird-like creature who tells the player, “It’s sad to be alone” and “At least no one can hurt me here”.

At first glance the references to death are easy to spot. The large hippo creature longs for death as a solution to all of his problems, the small blob-like creature on the moon tells the player that he is dead and as a result this makes him cool but his itchy feet contradict him being dead, proving he still has problems to deal with, while the small bird-like creature inside the planet is actually dead as he laments about how lonely death is while taking comfort in knowing that no future harm can come to him. However there’s much, much more to Gravida than simply death. The twist to it all comes from the name of the planet itself. Gravida isn’t some made-up alien word; it’s actually a term used to refer to a woman’s status during pregnancy. Specifically, it refers to the number of times a woman has been pregnant, but doesn’t it seem odd to have a planet named after such a thing when all of its inhabitants are talking about death? Well let’s take another look...

Now that we know everything isn’t just about death and that things might be more specifically about pregnancy, we can look at things in a new light. Starting with the small bird-like creature inside the planet. “It’s sad to be alone” and “At least no one can hurt me here” could also refer to the perspective of a fetus inside the womb. To the fetus the womb is protective and comforting, yet lonely at the same time. This is further emphasized by the parallels we can draw between the inside of the womb and the inside of the planet, where the bird-like creature who tells us this resides. The phrases said by the other creatures that didn’t quite make sense before fit much better in this new theme of pregnancy. “Sometimes my stomach hurts” can be compared to cramps and other discomforts caused by pregnancy, suggesting that perhaps the hippo-like creature is pregnant. The one thing that still might not seem to fit is the small blob creature on the moon saying “My feet itch...”, surprisingly however there is actually a connection here if we dig a bit deeper. Obstetric cholestasis is a rare pregnancy condition that affects the liver and makes the afflicted feel itchy. Most commonly this itchiness is present in the palms of the hands and the *soles of the feet*.

So here’s a planet themed around life and death. But why? What does this mean for Aether’s story? Well it all connects together in a very clever way. If we believe that the Monster is a physical representation of the Boy’s imagination and creativity, which is taking the Boy to these far-off planets, then we can infer that these planets represent his thoughts and fears that he explores using his creativity and imagination. While the Boy understands the concept of death; life, pregnancy and giving birth are less clear and so their representation here is more abstract. The whole planet is an understanding of life and death through the eyes of a child.

After solving the puzzle of Gravida (both narrative puzzle and actual gameplay puzzle) we head off back into space. Before we leave, an interesting thing to note about the puzzle is that even though the player has completed the puzzle, the inhabitants of the planet remain the same, repeating the same lines of dialogue. This makes sense, of course, if we assume that the planets represent troubles in the mind of a child. The Boy has “solved” the problem but his understanding of it has not changed.

And so we travel through space once more, free to pick our next destination.

Malaisus is a planet covered in water with many fish-like creatures. The fish-like inhabitants of Malaisus range in size from tiny ones smaller than the Boy to a large sunfish-like one with a sad look on his face. The sunfish is the most notable one as he is the only one who talks to the player, saying “You’re nothing special” and “Leave me alone”. The moon of Malaisus is actually attached to the planet itself, forming a small island in the otherwise endless water, but there are no inhabitants on it.

Like Gravida, the name Malaisus can give us some insight into what’s going on here. Malaisus is similar to malaise, a French word meaning “a general feeling of discomfort, illness, or uneasiness whose exact cause is difficult to identify”. Well our sunfish friend certainly didn’t sound too happy to see us, and looking at the entire situation it’s not too difficult to see why. The sunfish is literally a big fish in a small pond; he has no room to grow and looks down on everyone else as the biggest fish around. We, of course, can see this, but the sunfish can’t. He feels depressed and he doesn’t know why, all of which translates to what the Boy is feeling.

To solve the puzzle on Malaisus the player has to use the Monster to eat a bunch of the smaller fish and this is a perfect example of seeing this problem through the eyes of a child. If the sunfish doesn’t have any room to grow, why not make more room by getting rid of some of the smaller fish? While this might make sense in the Boy’s mind it doesn’t solve the problem at hand, the sunfish is still the largest fish and has nothing to aspire to. This is made even more apparent when, even after the puzzle is solved and there’s more room, the sunfish doesn’t change. He still says the same two lines of dialogue and still has a sad, disinterested look on his face.

There being nothing more the Boy can do, he takes off, leaving the sunfish behind.

As the player makes their way to Debasa they’ll notice that there’s a sort of green aura around the planet that has a face with its eyes crossed out and a gaping mouth, similar to that of the face on Gravida. This aura is visibly being made by several small moons placed around the planet and upon entering the aura the player’s movements will slow down considerably, leaving them unable to jump and swing as easily as they once could. The actual planet is rather small, with only two inhabitants, two children who look similar to the Boy. One of the children walks around the planet and tells the player “I’m stuck here because I’m bad” and “I’m going to blow this place up one day” while the other sits on top of a large mushroom and asks the player “...Why do you look like me?...”. Before we answer that let’s head to the moon, where a colony of blob-like creatures with terrified faces live. The largest one yells at the player, screaming in terror, and says, “Don’t Hurt Me!”

It’s obvious that the small moons are making this negative aura to keep the two children on the planet. This is made even more apparent once you consider that the name of the planet, Debasa, is quite similar to the word “debaser”, a word used to describe the act of

lowering ones rank, dignity or significance. Continuing with the idea that the planets represent the Boy's thoughts and fears; the children on the planet look like the Boy because they *are* the Boy. They're both a projection of how he sees himself, stuck in one place and feeling insignificant, with the one running around the planet expressing his frustration and understanding of the situation. He's here because he's bad, because the blob creatures on the moon are afraid of him, and because these small moons are keeping him here.

The puzzle on Debasa has the player swing around the small moons projecting the negative aura onto the planet, making them grow in size until they explode. As the player does this, the strength of the negative aura will decrease until the final small moon is gone and the aura dissipates completely. Interestingly enough Debasa is the one planet where the player's actions actually have some effect on the residents and planet. Once the player has destroyed all of the small moons the children will no longer be on the planet and the planet's previously sad and worried face is now replaced with a big grin. There could be any number of reasons for this but I think that it's because Debasa is about the Boy himself. He believes that if only these "moons" weren't holding him down he could leave this place. The moons could represent any number of things in the Boy's life: bullies that are actually putting him down, his parents whom the Boy believes are holding him back, or even nothing at all with the "moons" existing only in his mind as mental walls.

With the children of Debasa freed, the Boy turns his gaze to the stars.

The final planet, Bibulon, is the largest of the planets. It features 2 faces on either side of the planet, one a disgruntled looking male, the other a smiling female, and has 5 full-sized moons. On the surface of the planet there is a large slug-like creature with two heads. One of the heads tells the player, "I'll never amount to anything, they all think I'm dumb" while the other says, "One day I'll be great and show them all!" The main moon of Bibulon has a colony of small mole-like creatures on it that periodically pop out of the ground, with one of them telling the player, "We're glad he's gone". This is in reference to the moon's moon (yes, the moon has its own smaller moon) where a single larger mole-like creature can be found who tells the player, "I'm glad I left" as well as occasionally, "I wonder if they think about me". Bibulon's other moons all talk themselves, each of them saying something in reference to leaving home and their opinions on someone. They say the following: "I'll never go back home", "Personally I think he's pretty cool", "I hate him so much...", and "I'll go home when he leaves!"

It's important to know that the 4 talking moons are part of Bibulon's puzzle. The player solves this puzzle by standing on the moons and crashing them into the planet, but even then it isn't exactly clear what's going on. What we can gather from this point is that the moons have run away from home, their home being the main planet, because of someone there. The player's mind immediately goes to the slug-like creature, being the only one on the planet, but the moons don't appear to have a reason to hate the slug-like creature. Thankfully, the name of the planet once again holds the key to unlocking the mystery. Bibulon is very similar to the word *bibulous*, an old English word that refers to one who

is excessively fond of drinking alcohol. Suddenly everything falls into place, two-faced planet represents the Boy's family, with each face being one of his parents. The moons represent the Boy's thoughts of running away and his disdain for his alcoholic father, while the slug-like creature represents the Boy's desire to overcome and the pressure to meet his father's low expectations of him. The mole-like creatures on the main moon also take on a new meaning, representing what the Boy imagines it would be like to run away, while also showing the loneliness in doing so. When the boy crashes the moons into the planet it not only represents him keeping these feelings inside, in this case inside the planet, but also represents him forcing himself to stay, in this case physically forcing the moons into the planet. Once these hateful thoughts are out of sight, the puzzle is solved and the player can move on, but the problem still persists.

With no more planets to visit the Boy returns home.

Should the player return to Earth any time after completing a planet they may notice that it's different. The planet begins to shrink, and the wide grin that the Earth had begins to slowly fade into a sad frown. Here we have a literal representation of the Boy's world shrinking as he continues to explore his imagination and creativity, which is explicitly stated in the ending story. Also upon completion of a planet the once empty space will begin to populate with all kinds of creatures, ranging from massive space fish to other children on monsters of their own. This represents the growth of the Boy's imagination from when he begins his journey on Earth to the end of his journey.

Upon completing all of the puzzles on the other planets the Earth will have shrunk so much that when the player returns the earth will shatter upon impact, representing the Boy's detachment from the real world as he becomes lost in his fantasies. What started as an escape from reality became a new reality for the Boy, a new way for him to look at the world as he discovered his own imagination and creativity.

Strongest Element

Aether's strongest element lies in the narrative it has hidden in plain sight. Players are unable to see this side of Aether because they are caught up in the childlike world of the game, with its bright pastel colours and playful swinging mechanic. Aether has a profound story about how children deal with mature and complex issues all wrapped in a child's perspective. Like the thoughts of a child, it's only once the player sees past the game's playful exterior do they realize the game for what it truly is. A child coping with his problems by using his imagination to explore and make sense of them.

Unsuccessful Element

Almost all of Aether is built towards presenting the world as a child would see it. From its playful swinging mechanics, to its soft pastel colours, to its surprising comprehension of the world, there are many ways Aether presents with a child's point of view. However the one area where this isn't perfectly delivered is in the puzzles on each of the planets.

There are 4 puzzles, one on each planet, which must be solved to complete the game. These puzzles represent the Boy using his imagination and creativity to solve and deal with the problems and fears that each planet represents.

Malaisus' puzzle was brilliant in the way that showed how a child would deal with the problem of being a big fish in a small pond: get rid of some of the other fish so you have more room for the bigger fish. This misinterpretation of the problem leads to a misguided solution which in the end doesn't actually solve our problem. A similar situation occurs on Bibulon where the Boy deals with thoughts of running away and disdain for his alcoholic father. He knows that running away isn't an option so he keeps these thoughts inside, and this is done by having the player stand on the moons that represent these thoughts and have them physically force them inside the planet. Once again this doesn't really solve the problem of the Boy being troubled by his father and wanting to run away from home. However the other two puzzles don't clearly have this misguided problem solving of a child.

The puzzle on Gravida, the planet representing the Boy's understanding of life and death, has the player swing from a series of crystals on the inside of the planet without touching the ground. While parallels drawn between the interior of the planet and a mother's womb do allow for the possibility that this is the Boy acting out his understanding of conception, it is not as clearly presented as the other misguided solutions. In addition to this, the fact that the planet deals with both life and death further adds confusion as it is possible that the Boy is trying to comprehend abortion as opposed to conception however this is less likely. Meanwhile, the puzzle on Debasa has players swing around a series of small moons to destroy them and lift the negative aura that surrounds the planet. Here it's unclear exactly what the moons stand to represent which causes problems when trying to understand exactly how the Boy solves the problem. Even if the moons did represent something concrete, it's unclear what parallels can be drawn between swinging around the moon and removing an obstacle.

Highlight

The highlight moment of Aether would probably be the first time the player solves a puzzle and sees that nothing has changed. If the player has suspended their disbelief and immersed themselves in this child's imagination then they probably came into the situation under the impression that they were here to help the inhabitants of the planet through their actions. Upon seeing that their actions have not affected the inhabitants of the planet the game becomes more melancholy and players become unsure of what they understand about the game. As the player continues to be unable to help the inhabitants of the planets they begin to be clued in to the deeper meaning of the planets, Monster and the game. The ending also helps clue the player in as the ending of the game is more in line with the game's underlying narrative as opposed to the opening narrative that the player is presented and the two don't mesh well, forming additional doubt and curiosity in the player.

Critical Reception

Originally being a flash game there aren't really any reviews for Aether in a traditional sense, the closest being a review on jayisgames.com by StaceyG who gave the game 4.7/5 comparing it to the likes of The Little Prince in terms of its imaginative design and general aesthetic. Notably, one of her complaints with the game was that "On some of the planets, solving the puzzle didn't solve the creatures' problems, which was confusing." Which only helps cement how subtle the underlying narrative is. Other than that the game received generally positive reviews across multiple flash portal sites, with it getting a 4.44/5 on Newgrounds.com and a 3.8/5 on Kongregate.com. User reviews and comments usually give high praise to the game with many people putting forth their own interpretations and understandings of the game.

Lessons

- Having multiple layers to your story can be used to develop your story beyond what players are explicitly told.
- Giving meaning to the players actions has those actions leave a greater impact on the player, even if they're unaware of the meaning their actions carry.

Summation

The creativity of the Boy in Aether is so powerful that even the player is drawn into its childlike innocence. Players accept the Boy's imagination as real and it isn't until inconsistencies appear that players even begin to question its authenticity. This multilayered narrative is so powerful players don't even have to be aware of it to feel its effects. I first played Aether when it came out in 2008. I was 12 at the time and I couldn't understand exactly why I loved the game but I enjoyed it for what it was. I would come back to play Aether many more times but I was never able to see past the childlike playfulness of the game and realize it for what it really was until I sat down and decided to figure out the inexplicable reason I love this game.