

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Bulletstorm

Platform: Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Microsoft Windows

Genre: First Person Shooter

Release Date: February 22, 2011

Developers: People Can Fly, Epic Games

Publisher: Electronic Arts

Game Writer: Rick Remender

Overview

In the 26th century, a group of space-marines-turned-space-pirates slams their ship into another, owned by a corrupt general named Sarrano. As a result, they crash land on the planet Stygia, an abandoned resort planet populated entirely by mutants and raiders. Now the surviving members must fight their way towards the wreckage left by the commander's ship, and attempt to be rescued. In the process, they will fight alongside their once bitter rivals, be chased by skyscraper sized monsters, and unleash the power of a new technology that changes the nature of combat.

Bulletstorm has players assume the role of the drunkard leader Grayson Hunt as he teams up with his half-man half-machine friend Ishi Sato as they attempt to survive a hostile environment. The two have nothing to defend themselves with but a metric crap-ton of weapons, an anti-gravity "leash", and a multitude of dick jokes.

Characters

Grayson Hunt – The player character and leader of Dead Echo, who is responsible for the situation that the rest of the games characters find themselves in. He is reckless and brash, more interested in drinking and proving his worth in combat than the value of human life. When we first meet him, he is willing to kill thousands of soldiers on board the Ulysses, General Sarrano's flagship, in order to exact his revenge against his former general. Over the course of the game, he will seek some level of atonement for his actions. He represents a typical video game space marine, completely focused on his next course of action, and never taking the time to plan out his next move.

Ishi Sato – The only other survivor of Dead Echo, he voiced opposition to the attack on the Ulysses

prior to its engagement. The crash left him on the brink of death, needing to have his internal organs and several limbs replaced with machines. The surgery leaves Ishi as a cyborg horror, not fully healed and lacking control over his emotions. He is a symbolic manifestation of Grayson's guilt, a constant reminder of how he failed his team. He also represents Grayson's shadow archetype, quick to anger, not in control of himself, prone to make decisions without thinking about the consequences. He has a pronounced desire for revenge against Grayson for leaving him in his current state, mirroring Grayson's desire for revenge against his former general.

Trishka Novak – A survivor of the Ulysses and member of Final Echo, a squad built up to replace and hunt down Dead Echo and kill its members. She is a no-nonsense type soldier, and duty comes first. The planet Stygia was used as a training ground for Final Echo soldiers, and she serves as an exposition point for explaining to the player what they are seeing on the planet's surface. As the game progresses, the player learns that Trishka is actually the daughter of Bryce Novak, the reporter that Echo Squad killed at the beginning of the game. She is another manifestation of Grayson Hunt's guilt, shadowing the side of him that is ashamed of his past.

General Sarrano – The general that was formerly in charge of Dead Echo. This is the corrupt general who misled Grayson Hunt into believing that Bryce Novak and the other innocent civilians Dead Echo were criminals against the government. He is foul-mouthed and egotistical, taking much of his personality from examples of drill sergeants in military movies. He is aware of his position, and believes it buys him the right to behave in whatever way he wants. He represents the man that Grayson is on the path to become, making decisions that affect everyone, but giving them no control over their own destinies.

Breakdown

Bulletstorm is a tale of redemption, of a man being shown the error of his ways, and given the chance to atone. The story is Dickensian in nature, so much so that it may as well be looked at as if it were a modern retelling of *A Christmas Carol*. The man, Grayson Hunt, is stranded on a distant planet, and his only company are his ghosts, represented by the three companions he has with him. The game itself is almost sectioned into thirds, each having him stuck with one of these ghosts. Throughout the course of the game, Grayson will be confronted by these ghosts to provide the player with the contrast of who he once was, who he is now, and who he might someday become.

The game starts with the player in control of Grayson, on board his own ship. It's during the opening sequence that the player begins to understand him as he is. He is drunk, out of control, a slave to his emotions, and willing to sacrifice everything for the sake of vengeance, even his friend's lives. After allowing a portion of his own ship to be destroyed by a captured bounty hunter he forgot to check for explosives, he makes the drunken decision to attack the Ulysses, his former general's flagship, without a thought of the repercussions, and in spite of the protests of Ishi Sato.

When it inevitably goes bad, he blacks out, and the player is treated to a side mission, a memory

of how Grayson found himself in this predicament to begin with. It's there that the player sees Grayson as he was: naive, loyal, doing what he's told because he is a believer in his cause, his government, and his general. It's also this specific moment that will come back to haunt him later, as Bryce Novak, the reporter he's been sent to kill, will become a symbol of his guilt. The player is also introduced to General Sarrano, the game's primary (and incredibly foul-mouthed) antagonist and this story's "ghost of Christmas future." It is important to introduce him here, as the player will otherwise not meet the character until almost two-thirds of the way through the game.

Returning to present day and after the crash, Ishi is out of commission, and Grayson sets out with his surviving team members get a power cell so that "bio-weld" equipment can be used to save Ishi. While outside the ship, they are attacked by mutants and raiders. It is here that the player gets to know Grayson as he is even better, as well as teaching the game's mechanics. They can see that the crash itself has not changed him; he's still brash, and generally unthinking about others, his only goal being to save Ishi. When Grayson brings back the power cell, they are attacked before Ishi is fully healed, killing the remainder of Grayson's crew, and leaving Ishi a cyborg monster. Ishi becomes a symbol of Grayson's guilt, a walking reminder of what his actions have wrought. There are also flashes where Ishi loses control, becoming a slave to his emotions, bent on a singular purpose, to exact his revenge against Grayson. While in control, Ishi knows better, that he needs Grayson to escape, regardless of his feelings, but his robotic components make him lose the ability to control his emotions. This mirrors Grayson's recklessness, just a short time before, when he launched his attack on the Ulysses.

Although it's out of order from Dickens' tale, the player spends the opening hours of the game with the ghost of his present. It's important that the player begin to recognize these similarities early on, so that later they can use Ishi as a measurement for how Grayson has changed. The player gets to understand Ishi, and how his mood swings match his own. They get to understand how Grayson is through the eyes of Ishi as well, and how it reflects their own perceptions. Finally, it's during this time that we really begin to see true change in Grayson, leaving the pirate and "drinking buddy" persona's in the wreckage of his ship, though the player is able to determine the extent to which the latter is gone through in-game pick-ups in the form of alcohol.

During this opening time with Ishi, Grayson is hardly a changed man. We see them as similar more often than not. Although they often appear hostile to one another, in the quiet (and even in the not-so-quiet) moments, they are telling jokes with one another. When they get in a stressful situation, Ishi claims that he "does not speak train." When a giant robot they were using dies, he states "He served us well," to which Grayson responds "I named him Waggleton P. Tallylicker, but I never got the chance to tell him. He will be remembered." They even make jokes about making out when they enter an elevator. This type of humour persists throughout the game, but it aids in the comparisons of all the characters to Grayson. Although each has their own distinct personality, they all partake in this style of humour.

A large portion of the game has passed by the time Grayson and Ishi meet Trishka, a look into who Grayson used to be. Initially seen from a distance as a loyal soldier to the Confederate Army, she can instantly be recognized as having a similar disposition to Grayson, claiming that she "will kill [Grayson's] dick," to which his only response is to say that he will reciprocate in kind. Grayson doesn't actually join up with her until approximately a third of the way into the game. She serves as a specter of Grayson's past; unquestionably loyal, used to clean up General Sarrano's messes, yet fueled by her own sense of revenge. By the time she joins, the player should be familiar with who Grayson is, and

what he's all about. Her intro is hostile towards Grayson and Ishi, and Ishi responds by physically attacking her. This is an opportunity for us to see the growth in Grayson, as he gains control of his friend and asks that they all work together.

Through her interactions with Echo Squad, the player is privy to the ridiculousness of her mindset. Her blind faith in her superiors is another source of humour, as the survivors of Echo Squad are clearly not the monsters they've been made out to be. She begins to relate more to Ishi initially, as his more stoic demeanor keeps him from alienating her. She also sees him as relatable due to their circumstances, for which they both hold Grayson responsible. Her naiveté about the true motives of General Sarrano serves as a mirror through which Grayson can look. He looks at her behaviour, and learns that he can grow as well. He uses her to come to terms with the man he used to be, as he was once as naive and unquestioning as she is now. Having Trishka and Ishi alongside Grayson is important to give the player an opportunity to see both who he once was and who he began the game as. Though similar in many ways, we can start to see how he had already changed by the start of the game. We also get periods where Grayson and Trishka have one on one time, to emphasize the change between his current self and his past self. They continue to play on each other's words, such as one point when Grayson states "feeling like I should make some sort of witty comment here," and her response is "Why start now?" This shows that it is not merely Ishi's reaction to being around Grayson, Trishka as well shares the same sense of humour, more clearly defining her as an aspect of himself.

Eventually Ishi decides the two of them are at odds with his goals, and leaves the two behind. Then, Grayson learns who she is, the daughter of the man he killed during his flashback earlier in the game, Bryce Novak. It's at that moment that she becomes a real life, palpable, manifestation of his past guilt. She was there when Echo Squad killed her father, though she was just a young child at the time. He tells her of General Sarrano's involvement, leaving out his own. This is not simply to avoid confrontation, it is his guilt that keeps him from coming clean, as he is unwilling to cope with the repercussions. Here, Trishka evolves, becoming another aspect of his past self, the aspect we see after finding out about Sarrano's motives during the opening flashback; searching for answers and bent on revenge against the perpetrators at all costs.

It's roughly two thirds of the way into the game before they meet up with General Sarrano, the specter of Grayson's future. This initial confrontation is a reflection of the four sides of Grayson. Trishka plays the part of his past, holding the General at gunpoint even though he is their only hope of survival, hoping for answers and willing to sacrifice everyone else to get them. Ishi is the game-start present, who has his own goals, but will still sacrifice everyone else to achieve them. General Sarrano plays the part of a possible future; a man he could easily become, vulgar and foul-mouthed, so taken away with his own rhetoric that he expects others to follow it blindly, regardless of whatever sacrifices they must make.

Grayson at this point has become the changed man, the man that's open to a new life, but is not yet there. He initially joins Trishka in threatening Sarrano, only to stand down when his friend demands it. It's at that instant that we see the largest change in him so far, his goal of revenge right in front of him, but as his penitence for his past, he lowers his weapon. Trishka, his past, keeps her weapon trained on Sarrano, and Ishi keeps his focused on her. Interestingly, at this point that Sarrano suggests they all team up with a "C'mon you dandy tarts," mirroring the action when they met Trishka, though before it was Grayson that made the suggestion. However, in addition to that, he tosses Trishka from the roof, knowing that he is protected by Ishi and their circumstance, of there being a bomb set to destroy all life

on the planet that only he can deactivate.

While Ishi and Sarrano are in his squad, we really begin to see how Grayson could have become Sarrano. Though antagonistic, Ishi and Sarrano hold a similar demeanor, and a singular focus on their end goal. Ishi doesn't have the sharp wit that Grayson has, which draws the comparison to Grayson rather than to Ishi. The player themselves will start to laugh at Sarrano's jokes, and start to become more empathetic toward the man. While this is never full empathy and the player will not forgive Sarrano of his misdeeds, we see how easily that Grayson could have become this man.

During this section, Sarrano gets separated briefly while Ishi and Grayson have a moment of introspection together. Ishi forgives Grayson for the years of solitude after finding out about what Sarrano was using them for, or rather, he says there was nothing to forgive, and claims "You led us on a quest for atonement. A chance to reclaim our souls." Grayson's guilt is largely erased as a result, and he no longer needs to prove anything to his past, present or future. Although it is not Sarrano, his ghost of the future, doing it, this is the moment that he is shown his tombstone.

A short time later Sarrano betrays his newfound "allies", by having them activate the bomb they thought they were going to deactivate. They have never ceased their hostilities towards him, showing us the disdain that Grayson continues to feel for what he might one day have become. Grayson and Ishi are saved by Trishka, who survived her fall by grabbing a power line. It's no coincidence that she appears again as soon as Sarrano is gone, as there is a rejection of and by his "future self", and acceptance of who he used to be.

The trio makes their way towards a drop ship that is coming to rescue Sarrano. Once on board, Trishka abandons Grayson and Ishi once more, planning on rushing ahead to execute General Sarrano for putting a hit on her father. Her actions mirror his own at the beginning, leading her companions to their deaths and ultimately to her own, all for the sake of her own revenge. Only this time, we are given the chance to show ourselves the changed man. Grayson and Ishi rush to prevent her murder of Sarrano, hoping to get there before Trishka.

They fail, of course, at least in the latter part. Trishka manages to make it to Sarrano before they do. Grayson encounters her with a gun to Sarrano's head. Sarrano remarks, "Whoa whoa whoa. Hold your fire, dandelion" before telling her that Grayson and Ishi were the ones that killed her father. Grayson explains his actions to her, saying that he attacked the Ulysses as a hope for redemption. Sarrano's attempts at manipulation culminate with him taking complete control over Ishi's robotic systems and knocking out Trishka. This showdown is a chance for Grayson to fight his start-game-current self; reckless, out of control, no sense of self-preservation or that of loved ones. With his dying breath, Grayson utters "I don't hold you accountable." This is Grayson moving into his own acceptance phase. He no longer is placing the blame on others, he's letting go of his guilt for the past, and the man he was when the game started. He's accepting the consequences of his own actions as the screen goes black.

He re-opens his eyes to find Ishi threatening Sarrano, and being beaten up and shot as a result. Sarrano comes to finish the job by shooting Grayson in the head, and Ishi sacrifices himself to block the bullet. This gives Grayson a chance to fight back, and he ends up killing General Sarrano with an exploding barrel. This whole sequence, serves as this game's version of Scrooge waking up in the morning. Ishi being shot is the total death of who he used to be. Sarrano's death is him burning his possible future, a complete rejection of who he could potentially have become.

The remainder of the game is a short sequence cleaning up the rest of the actions of Grayson, in much the same way that Scrooge fixed his treatment of the Crachit family. While perhaps not as substantial in showing us how Grayson has changed, it wraps up the rest of the story, and shows him saving Trishka, and allowing her to not live her life the same way that he has lived his.

Strongest Element

The strongest narrative element by far is the humour. It hits the player early, and it hits them often. By starting the game off with the drinking captain of a space ship, it calls a certain level of ridicule. The art style aids in the humour, appearing as a cross between Gears of War and Borderlands (another humorous series.) This aspect makes the game feel light and inviting. Players can easily enter into the game world, and play through without ever feeling any part of the deeper narrative. Even those that do play the game and get the narrative can still enjoy the sense of humour. Although foul-mouthed and immature, it appeals to a wide audience that is no longer shocked by simple vulgarity. The game often had to come up with its own insults, and generally succeeds in not just doing so but making sure the player knows they are all meant to be insults.

Unsuccessful Element

There's a certain level of dissonance between the gameplay and the narrative. The narrative has a light and fun way of looking at a reasonably deep narrative, but the gameplay is completely about the light and fun. There is no portion of the game where Grayson must take an introspective journey through his own psyche. Most of what I've talked about here is never mentioned in any capacity, and this is mostly up to my own personal interpretation. Although I'm not sure such a sequence would have made sense in this game, the humour and gameplay that encourages creative murder can keep the players from seeing any deeper than surface level. In fact, this may be the reason that the game did not sell all that well, as the pubic demo mentioned nothing of the deep narrative and missed the mark on humour, and focused instead on the game mechanics. It is a well-made shooter to be sure, but ultimately just another shooter going up against the likes of Gears of War, Halo, and Call of Duty. Not making this narrative accessible, even to those that did play the game, is a consequence of that.

Highlight

The highlight of this game is the first time the games four main characters all interact, in a cut scene taking place on top of a building. General Sarrano is cornered in his own escape pod, and running low on ammo while being attacked by the enemies on the planet. Ishi comes to the rescue as a giant Godzilla-like monster looms nearby preparing to eat them. Sarrano arms the self-destruct in his pod, and gets the monster to eat his escape pod, killing the monster when it explodes. Grayson and Trishka, who had been in a helicopter keeping the monster busy, land nearby. What follows is a stand-off, where Trishka demands answers from Sarrano, paralleling Grayson's interaction years before, after killing Novak and confronting the General about it. When Grayson also pulls a gun on Sarrano, Ishi, in turn, pulls his gun on Grayson, saying that Sarrano is their only hope of being rescued, since they would send a rescue shuttle for him. Sarrano then states that Ishi is his "new best friend." Grayson, showing

that he has evolved over the course of the game, lowers his weapon. Ishi and Trishka then have a bit of a showdown as she asks Sarrano questions about her father. Sarrano laughs it off, instead telling them about a weapon that will kill all life on the planet which is set to go off before they can be rescued. He then says that they must all work together. The second Trishka lowers her guard, Sarrano pushes her off the edge of the building. In this moment, we see his past self, the naïve soldier who only does what they think is best being thrown off a building, and his future self, displaying a complete disregard for his own companions, viewing them as entirely expendable. We also see Grayson maturing, and realizing that the life of his friend, Ishi, is more valuable than his own revenge.

Critical Reception

Bulletstorm received generally favorable reviews, and sits at an 84 on Metacritic. Among the most critical reviews, Wired proclaimed that it was “the world’s longest dick joke”, claiming that the games sense of humour was, in fact, what drags the game down. However, they still gave the game a 7 out of 10. One of the more favorable reviews came from Game Trailers, giving the game a 9.25, and proclaiming that it is “a goofy sci-fi romp that doesn’t deserve to have its cut-scenes skipped.” Also of note, however, is a certain level of controversy coming from Fox News. In order to write an article, they interviewed a psychiatrist named Carole Lieberman, who proclaimed “The increase in rapes can be attributed in large part to the playing out of [sexual] scenes in video games.” Although the psychiatrist does not mention *Bulletstorm*, the author at Fox News, John Brandon, draws the comparison. Wired jumped to the games defense, calling it “faulty logic”, saying that even in ongoing communication she failed to produce any evidence, and cited an overall decrease in rape cases in the past 20 years.

Lessons

Lesson 1 – The abundance of humour makes the deepness of the narrative harder to absorb.

The overwhelming majority of players who played the game remember it for its humour above anything else. While it’s certainly great that the game has left a lasting impression on so many players, this also detracts from any acknowledgement of a deeper narrative. It is understandably difficult to see a deep narrative in a game that includes lines such as “Skippy Granola’s groovy dreamcatcher is pickin’ up some bumper vibes.”

Lesson 2 – If gameplay and narrative aren’t working together, then they are working against each other.

While the gameplay, narrative, and dialog are all amazing individually, they do not really feed each other. The silliness of the gameplay and the silliness of the dialog match each other and enhance each other, hiding the narrative level beneath it. Often what is actually being said during the cutscenes and in-game dialog overrides what is actually being said, and what is actually happening at a given time is harder to pay attention to because of it.

Lesson 3 – Even massive marketing can be bad for a game.

Or rather, a misused marketing campaign can negatively impact the game. When it came out, many of my friends and I wrote it off as just another Gears of War attempt. To this day, the EA official site still

describes it as “Set in a futuristic utopia, an elite peacekeeping force thwarts the rumblings of civil war.” This makes the game come across as taking itself too serious, and wanting to be Gears of War without any of the fun. Even in the publically released demo, the game didn’t display any of the trademark humour or narrative, instead seeming like a first person shooter Gears of War with a new mechanic.

Summation

Ultimately, I chose this game because I feel like it's too often written off as just another dumb space marine shooter. The demo for the game completely ignored that there was any story whatsoever, and it was nearly a year before I or anyone else I know bothered to play it. It is something of an unknown gem, not experiencing the commercial success or notoriety of many modern shooters, but featuring a more complex and yet accessible story than the most mainstream of them. A friend once proclaimed that it's the game that Duke Nukem Forever wished it could have been, and I feel that’s a fairly apt description, as it succeeds in the same type of humour, without being as shallow or misogynistic. It's one of my personal favourite games of the past generation, both for its gameplay, and its surprisingly deep narrative.

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