

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Oxenfree
Platform: XBOX | PlayStation | Steam
Genre: Graphical Adventure
Release Date: January 15th 2016
Developer: Night School Studio
Publisher: Night School Studio
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Adam Hines

Overview

On the mysterious Edwards Island five teens come face to face with supernatural forces beyond their control. *Oxenfree* is a single player narrative driven game with equal parts supernatural mystery and coming of age story. The player takes on the role of a blue haired girl named Alex, who is trying to come to terms with her brother's death all while she is getting to know her new step-brother Jonas. On the island Alex hangs out with Jonas, Ren, Nona, and Clarissa; a cast of characters that can be likened to those in classic 1980s films. Each one of these characters has a tragic past that must be confronted during their stay on the island.

The whole of *Oxenfree*'s story is based off of 1980s horror films, the plot points following the same format where teens sneak off to party; scary things happen; teens find information to solve the problem; everything seems to be fixed; but twist at the end reveals to the audience that things are in fact not back to normal. The five teens go to the island expecting a party, but accidentally end up opening rifts to the other side allowing spirits to come through and possess them. Alex and her friends must find a way off the island or else lose their bodies to the vengeful spirits of the island. The game balances a story that is just as character-driven as it is plot-driven, while providing some player agency with smart dialogue options and a variety of endings. It makes use of horror movie tropes in a way that does not seem tired and provides strong three dimensional characters, proving that games do not need to rely on jump scares and gore to get a good scare out of the player.

Characters

- **Alex**

The player takes on the role of Alex, a 17-year-old rebellious teenager who is the main protagonist of this story. She is bright, quirky, and had a strong bond with her brother before his untimely passing; shown by her wearing his red jacket during the events of *Oxenfree*. Alex feels responsible for her brother, Michael's, death believing that if she had not asked him to go swimming one last time at Edwards Island he never would have drowned. After her brothers passing her parents separated and when her mother remarried she gain a new brother Jonas. The player shapes Alex's relationships and personality through the dialogue options with all the non-playable characters (NPCs).

- **Jonas**

He is Alex's new 18-year-old step-brother and the deuteragonist in *Oxenfree*. Jonas plays the role of the mysterious bad boy, being one to partake in what is perceived as deviant behavior (smoking and lock picking). He has also been rumored to have had a run in with the law, which later he confides in Alex that he spent time in Juvenile Detention after beating someone who made fun of his mother's illness. He comes from a small town

that he does not care for, and moved when his father remarried Alex's mother after the loss of his own due to cancer. Jonas is wise beyond his years, yet he does not think highly of himself often stating that he is not intelligent nor a good person when his actions clearly indicate otherwise.

- **Michael**

He is Alex's deceased older brother who died due to drowning while swimming with Alex at Edwards Island before he moved away with Clarissa, his long-term girlfriend. He was a model student, football player, well loved, and very supportive; an all-around golden boy. He appears in time rifts throughout the game providing the player with some insight to Alex and his relationship.

- **Ren**

As the easily excitable stoner Ren is the one to bring everyone together for the beach party. He is Alex's childhood friend who relies on her a great deal, especially when it comes to his crush on Nona which can be turned to romance with the player's help. He also helps to serve as an interesting point of conflict being that he does not trust Jonas due to his rumored run in with the law. Interestingly enough he fits into the classic horror archetype more so than the other characters, taking on the role of nerd stoner. He is filled with information and is often used for comedic relief.

- **Clarissa**

She is the involuntary antagonist being the first to be possessed by the ghosts of the island. Clarissa very much cared for Michael being his girlfriend and resents Alex, blaming her for his death. She comes off as cold and callous to those she does not care for, but to her friends she is kind hearted and loyal.

- **Nona**

As Clarissa's best friend Nona emulates and idolizes her. She is a shy girl but over the course of the game she comes out of her shell revealing that she has a knack for music, particularly with playing piano. Like Clarissa she looks down on those she deems as losers, but over the course of the game the strange happenings on Edwards Island help to bring all of these characters together.

Breakdown

Oxenfree expertly makes use of horror tropes to create a suspenseful paranormal mystery that tells a beautiful coming of age story and arguably rivals some of the best horror games to date without having to resort to gore or jump scares. Every element in this game has been designed to serve a purpose; to tell a powerful story in an engaging and compelling way. This is most evident when looking at how the mechanics and narrative work together. Like many other non-linear games *Oxenfree* allows the player to make choices that will influence the outcome of the game. Unlike these games dialogue options are not limited to cutscenes, rather they appear as the player explores the island acting as consumables to complement the walking system type movement. All games have some form of consumable, in the Mario games it is coins; Halo it becomes killing aliens; and in *Oxenfree* it is the dialogue. The options are always presented to the player at the most opportune times during their travels, brilliantly allowing the designers to feed the player more information without making the task too daunting for the end user.

The game opens with Alex, Ren, and Jonas on a ferry boat heading to Edwards Island. While waiting the player can explore their surroundings as Ren explains the tradition behind the party they are going to and the rumored anomalies on the island, at which point the conversation turns to Alex. The player must answer whether or not they have been paying attention. If they say that they have Ren will test them by asking what the last thing he said was. This is the first narrative test in the game and has little bearing on which ending the player will get, but it foreshadows future events where they will be tested in a similar way. This chapter of the game closes with the three teens taking a selfie. This is an optional action that takes place at the end of each major plot point in the game and is shown during the loading screen providing a nice summation for the player. If one were to look at the pictures taken on their own, they would be able to see a clear progression in not only the story but the characters as well.

Once they reach the island, the ferry leaves essentially standing them on the island until morning. This plays into one of the most common themes in the horror genre; isolation. Up until this point nothing bad has happened, but now the player knows that there is no escape from Edwards Island until the ferry returns. The

three teens make their way through the tourist town to join Clarissa and Nona on the beach. Already board when they arrive they decide to play an altered version of truth or dare called ‘truth or truth.’ At this point a lot of personal questions are asked to each character, including Alex allowing the player to partake in one round where they answer a question and get to ask one in return. This is an interesting way to give the player absolute control without losing them, because they are given freedom within a controlled system that allows the designers to still keep the story tight and the player interested. The ‘truth or truth’ moment also helps to establish the basis of the relationships between each character, for instance the player discovers Ren has a crush on Nona and that no one approves of Jonas, while Clarissa is openly rude to Alex. All of this information was shown with a few lines of dialogue and a strong set up. Naturally the teens become board of this game and decide to investigate the abnormal frequencies of the cave. At this point in the game the player is introduced to their portable radio and uses it to match the right frequencies wherein Jonas spots a green light and goes to investigate the cave. Skeptically Ren stays behind, but Alex is meant to follow. Everything up until this point has been set up for the story ahead and meant to teach the player the core mechanics of the game, everything after this point builds upon the player’s knowledge.

Finding Jonas in the cave Alex tunes into another frequency and unexpectedly forms a rift. The voice on the other end of the rift is disjointed and jumbled, the clearest phrase being “*Is. Leave. Possible.*” Shortly after the two experience visions and blackout. They wake up in front of Harden Tower, scared and with limited options they climb the tower hoping that there will be some way to contact help. In keeping with the theme of isolation there is no way them to reach anyone off of the island. Instead they receive two calls one from Ren the other from Clarissa, both are audibly terrified and are asking Alex to come find them. The player must now make a decision as Ren and Clarissa are on opposite sides of the map and the choice the player makes will greatly impact their relationship with said characters.

After having played through the game multiple time it appears that saving Ren first is the better choice, purely from a narrative standpoint. In going to save Ren the player encounters the first time loop where a figure appears in the reflection of the lake giving Alex advice, introducing them to the concept of fixing the soundtrack by interacting with a magnetophone; thereby correcting time. They also come across Nona shortly after who explains that she just saw another Alex and Jonas, yet this does not seem possible. The player instructs her to go to Harden Tower and wait for them, it takes a bit of convincing but she does. Once they reach Ren it is apparent that something is off, his eyes are glowing red and he is mumbling; he is possessed. Alex and Jonas must correct time and then match the frequency on their radio to open another rift and release Ren sending him to meet up with Nona at the tower. It is here that the player finds out that they are dealing with the dead crew of an old war submarine, fitting prefect with the ‘someone died here’ trope of the horror genre. After being given this context the events that follow at Fort Milner seem much more intense being that the player has already been put on edge. Continuing to Clarissa, Alex and Jonas become much closer as they are forced to rely on one another to survive. When they reach the Fort time loops again and this time the player is completely isolated as the ghosts have taken Jonas away and she is tested to save his life. The player is asked three questions, to which the answers could have been found in the environment leading up to this point. This narrative test acts as a gateway to the next section and can almost always be completed by the player. After completing the test they make their way upstairs and once again Alex is given advice by her reflection, another trope used in the horror genre where reflections are used to scare the audience. The advice is specific and plays a key role in future time loops. When they find Clarissa time loops to her hanged and repeats to her falling to her death. It then corrects to her gone. Unsure of what they just saw Alex and Jonas head back to Harden Tower to meet up with the others. While the player would have received this information regardless of their choice to save Ren or Clarissa first, the narrative flows best when Ren is picked first else the story feels disjointed.

Once in the tower a fight breaks out. Tensions are high and everyone is scared beyond reasoning. Accusations begin to fly between Ren and Jonas. Ren blames Jonas for going into the cave, while Jonas blames Ren for taking them there in the first place. No one is happy with the situation and Nona is distressed over the loss of Clarissa. This is a major turning point for the player, they can help guide this argument and take sides if they see fit. Regardless their actions, this scene has a large impact on how these characters not only see Alex but each other throughout the rest of the game. The feud eventually subsides and the four teens devise a plan to get off the island. They know that a nearby Adler Estate has a small boat that they could use to leave, but of course

there is a problem a key is required to gain entrance. Since Margret Adler is recently deceased her belongings are being held in town. With that Alex sets out with which ever character the player chooses to find this key. In town they find the keys to the boat and an old radio that can be used to unlock doors. On the way back Alex experiences her own time loop where she replays a memory of her spending time with Clarissa and Michael, time fixes and they carry on. Everyone meets outside of the Adler Estate where they run into Clarissa who was passed out. Everyone is beyond ready to leave but it won't be so easy. Typical to the horror genre is the idea that the universe is acting against the protagonist and so there is no easy way out of their situation, so naturally the boat is out of fuel. They further investigate the Adler house and the player is given one more final narrative test, this time Ren, Jonas, and Nona are all being possessed and if the player fails they will lose them all; each wrong question leads to one person being taken away. During this test the player discovers that there could possibly be a way to fix the tear they created in the cave that let the scorn spirits through, but since the original entrance to the cave is now blocked off they must find a new way down into the cavern. It takes some looking but eventually they find some old footage of blueprint for different facilities on the island, one of them being a bunker that leads back into the caves.

There is only one more thing to do at this point, Alex must confront the ghosts head on and close the rift. Not willing to leave her alone Jonas goes with her down into the caves once again. There is a point where the player has one last chance to talk to each character before descending into the caves. It serves as a nice moment to allow the player some breathing space as the rest of the game has been fairly action packed in comparison.

Upon entering the bunker Alex must tune a magnetophone, this sending her into the rift side in the cave where she tunes into another rift and enters a void. In the void she encounters a possessed Clarissa who is speaking for the dead crew members. The player is presented with another choice, they are warned that she will die if she closes the rift and time will loop indefinitely or they could go through the portal and leave Clarissa, in return the rest can keep their bodies. Before making a decision the player can appeal directly to the crew members trying to convince them to let both Alex and Clarissa go. After making their choice Alex time loops one more time to a conversation between her and Michael where he is asking for her opinion on him moving out. It is this specific time loops that the reflected figure is revealed to be Alex giving herself warnings, as seen earlier on in the game. The warning precisely given help to inform the player's decision in these moments and this one is no different, Alex has a chance to save Michael telling him not to move out therefore they never went for that fateful swim. This poses the player with another complex and powerful decision. Throughout the course of the game the player has been developing relationships with Ren, Clarissa, Nona, and Jonas. By saving her brother it could affect the time line so that Jonas never becomes their step-brother, Ren could no longer be Alex's friend and Alex might not have ever met Nona.

Time corrects and the game finishes where it started, with Alex, Jonas, Ren, Clarissa, and Nona on the ferry heading home. Jonas tells Alex that whatever she did fixed everything and they all swear not to tell anyone about what happened to them before taking their final picture.

In the epilogue the player is given their ending and the picture taken at the end of the game reflects the relationships that were formed or broken over the course of the game. The voice over plays talking about what each character did with their life after the events of *Oxenfree*. In a strange turn of events the screen flickers and Alex tells the player that she is going to meet up with some friends on Edwards Island and that she is going to pick up Jonas, who she has never met before, signaling that the player is caught in an infinite loop.

The game is written in such a way that it provides the player with hope that the loop could possibly be broken leading them to try another play through. If they do, what they will find is the hard work of the designers and the true genius of the narrative. Every moment in the story was given time and never rushed so that the player could absorb what is going on, a trait that any narrative game should have regardless, but in this case would allow the player to catch any changes the second time through. What makes *Oxenfree* so special is that future playthroughs are effected by previous ones. The developers took the time to add new content and conversations that would add to the player experience the second time through the game. This story structure lends itself so well to games, since they are meant to be replayed and Night School Studio took advantage of this. When the player goes down into the caves and meets the ghosts they no longer seem to address Alex, but instead look past her to the player. The game does not explicitly break the fourth wall but the writing creates an eerie feeling that goes above and beyond in reinforcing the horror themes throughout.

The Narrative themes in *Oxenfree* are integrated into the mechanics in such a way that they support one another. The game would not be whole if it was missing either element proving that the designers did an excellent job at balancing both the narrative and the game mechanics to create an enriching experience.

Strongest Element

Oxenfree does a wonderful job at telling a compelling coming of age story wrapped in a supernatural mystery by making proper use of movie clichés and standing by it. Coming of age stories typically emphasize dialogue over action and take place in the past. *Oxenfree* does this in the most literal way by having the main mode of interaction for the player being the dialogue system. Alex's, and thereby the player's relationships with each of the characters are affected by the dialogue choices that are made. When this cast of character first come together, everyone is fairly apprehensive of each other and are really only there to party and get drunk. Their dynamic can be compared to that of the *Breakfast Club*'s cast where people from dissimilar backgrounds come together and gain a better understand of one another. At the same time there are the time loops where the player experiences part of each characters past, especially Alex's, reinforcing the coming of age trope; dealing with the past. With each time loop Alex seems to grow as a person, taking one step closer to reconciling her feelings towards Michael's death. The supernatural sub plot only acts as a catalyst for change forcing each of these characters far beyond their comfort zone in forcing them to face their fears. However, if the supernatural elements were overdone then it could have completely taken away from the player's relationship building, displaying just how well both elements of the story have been balanced by the designers.

Unsuccessful Element

While there are many fantastic elements in *Oxenfree* one of the most unsuccessful were the narrative tests that the player had to partake in. The first of these tests can be seen at the start of the game on the ferry where Ren asks Alex to repeat what he said to see if she was listening; the second in Fort Milner to save Jonas; and the third at the Adler Estate to save all of Alex's friends. The answers to these tests could often be found as the player explores the island, which is of course assuming that they are paying attention and are able to retain this information. Testing the player in this way is interesting and is an economical use of the dialogue system, but it did fall flat. One of the problems was in cluing the player into this system. The first test with Ren offers no consequence for the player not having payed attention and it is not until much later in the game that the player sees this type of testing once again. After having gone so long without being exposed to this type of interaction the player is not likely to force themselves to absorb as much information as they can in anticipation for their next test. While this is a short coming of the systems the ultimate downfall was in how arbitrary these test were, coupled with the dependency to rely on the player's ability to retain information. Since the players are given no indication of when the tests were going to occur they could not, in a sense, prepare for them. This may have been something that the design team noticed as well and could be why the last question for each test is normally an easy one. This devalues the narrative tests overall, if the player gets at least one question right then they get to keep their friends and everything is relatively fine. It is because of this that the tests felt empty and without cause, if the player only has to get one out of three questions right then what purpose is there for them to pay attention to the story around them when there is no consequence. If taken a little further the narrative tests could have proven to be great moments of suspense for the players.

Highlight

The moment that brings all of the best aspects of *Oxenfree* together is the fight between Jonas and Ren in Harden Tower after travelling across the island to find everyone. This scene is emotional and full of tension. It is artfully written so that the player can truly feel the weight of their decisions and the impact they will have on the relationships that have been developed thus far. From the start Ren and Jonas did not get along, and finally with a mix of fear and anger they both confront one another. The player has the option to pick one of the two sides, either blaming Jonas or Ren for the past events, or they can break up the fight trying to keep the

peace. In any case, the amount of tension that builds up coupled with the wonderful voice acting leaves the player feeling like they just came out of a real fight.

Critical Reception

Over all *Oxenfree* was very well received having been nominated at four events this past year in five different categories. One of the most recent was the nomination for best narrative in the 2016 Game Awards. The story, dialogue and characters are typically praised by reviewers.

- **IGN – Kallie Page – 8.2/10:** IGN stated that *Oxenfree* has pacing problems, forcing the player to have to stop and listen to what is being said before carrying on, else lose out on the opportunity to speak. They did note that the “beautifully developed relationships” make up for it in the end. She also notes that the game is elegantly simple and that the dialogue can come off as a bit unnatural.
- **Gameplanet- Adam Goodall – 9/10:** Goodall argued that the game was, “Spooky as all heck” and that the branching story was told with “sincerity” and humor that worked well with all the twists and turns that the game took them through. He thoroughly enjoyed the ending and thought that the conversation system was one that should be looked to in the making of future games.
- **Polygon- Allegra Frank – 7/10:** Frank looked at the branching dialogue system and was impressed with the level of control that the player was given over the protagonist, but was disappointed with how little of an impact Alex’s dialogue choices seemed to have on the overarching story. They were also very pleased with the earnest conversations that the characters have with each other considering the amount of talking that is being done in the game. In the end they believed that *Oxenfree* showed a lot of potential, but they felt that the length was disappointing and that the game seemed to favor “quantity over quality” when it came to the dialogue bubbles.

Lessons

- **When developing a narrative driven game make sure that the mechanics and the narrative work hand in hand.** *Oxenfree* depends on the player retaining and being fed story through dialogue. The mechanics in the game revolve around this, the timed discussions and narrative tests are clear economical uses of the dialogue system. The use of the radio is also supported by the narrative, if it was not then there would simply be no good reason to have this mechanic in the first place.
- **Know your genre and stick to it!** In doing this there is a greater chance that the writer will be able to come up with a fascinating story that keeps the audience’s attention. Knowing the tropes and clichés of the genre can help a writer distinguish between what they want to tell and how to avoid telling it poorly. If Night School Studios did not know the horror genre so well the story could have come off as tacky and the sincere dialogue could have come across as forced.
- **Character are the gateway to the player.** As seen in *Oxenfree* they are the most memorable part in the game. Each character is tied to a plot point that helps them associate the events with that specific character. There has been research done on this by many user researchers and it has been noted that players remember characters best. It is through the characters that the player builds relationships and it is through them that they experience the story. By giving the player complex characters that they can explore and get to know we open up the door to talking about real problems and close to home issues through these characters.

Summation

Narrative in games has come an extremely long way, and plays a key role in the games industry today; which is why it is so important to look at games like *Oxenfree* to see what they are doing and how they are telling stories. There is a lot to unpack in this game, but it is worth doing so because there is much to learn when it comes to pacing and how best to tell a story. *Oxenfree* is a great example of how to take two different genres, horror and teen drama, and combine the two in a way that feels organic. There is also much to be explored in how narrative can influence mechanics and vice versa, something that this game has done very well with its reuse of the dialogue system.

Finally, Night School Studio put a tremendous amount of work and effort into delivering this game and it clearly shows. Everything from the art to down to the code, the story to the voice acting has been well thought out and executed giving us this beautiful game that should be celebrated and studied for its elegant narrative design.