

Game Narrative Review

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Your name (one name, please): Lauren Breeding
Your school: Southern Methodist University - Guildhall
Your email: lbreeding@smu.edu
Month/Year you submitted this review: March 2017

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Game Title: *Nihilumbra*
Platform: PC
Genre: Puzzle platformer
Release Date: September 25, 2013
Developer: BeautiFun Games
Publisher: BeautiFun Games
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Kevin Cerdà

Overview

Over the course of *Nihilumbra*, Born forms and escapes from the Void that chases and attempts to capture him for the rest of the game. Formed from nothingness, Born explores the world and discovers powerful abilities by absorbing colors from flowers in each environment. In each setting, Born learns a new color with a unique effect, masters its use in concert with the other colors learned so far, fights and avoids monsters sent after him by the Void, and ultimately escapes the Void itself during the last section of each environment chapter. At the end of each chapter, Born narrowly escapes, living another day while the Void engulfs and destroys the environment.

Born progresses through six different environments total: Void, frozen mountains, forest, ash desert, volcano, and city. A narrator accompanies his journey as he traverses each environment and learns its power, alternatively giving hints for success, commenting on Born's emotions and thoughts, berating Born for continuing his struggle, and complimenting his growth and abilities. By the end of the game, Born collects the full set of five power and colors and decides to finally stop running before the Void destroys the entire world behind him. With his new experiences and abilities, the Void rejects him in the final moment, recognizing that Born is no longer void, and instead exists as his own being.

Characters

- **Born** – Born is the player character, formed at the beginning of the game as a shapeless lump in and from the Void. Amidst narration questioning his existence and telling him to remain in the Void, Born escapes and flees into the world, where he discovers abilities and experiences that make him a complete being

separate from the nothingness of his origin. Shortly after his escape, Born discovers a scarecrow on the mountain and takes a similar shape, retaining his black color interrupted only by a white mouth and eyes. Throughout the game, Born does not speak, but the narrator gives voice to his inner thoughts and reminds him of his status as an outcast that can change but not contribute to the world. His only true aim is to live as a being separate from the Void, though he does not want the destruction of the environment this aim requires.

- **Narrator** – The narrator speaks throughout the game with accompanying words appearing in the environment. The narrator largely gives voice to the inner thoughts of Born as he explores the world, expressing doubt, regret, ambition, and triumph in cycles as the Void approaches and recedes. The narrator also gives hints and tutorial guidance when new mechanics or monsters appear.
- **The Void** – Born begins life in the Void as the introductory environment. Throughout the rest of the game, monsters created from the Void appear in the levels to attack Born, and the Void itself chases Born in the last level of each chapter as a shifting black and purple mass encroaching from the left side of the screen.
- **Monsters** – Monsters created by the Void appear throughout the levels with varying shapes and abilities, all identifiable by their black and purple color. Each monster encountered possess new powers based on the player’s experience in the game so far, as some mimic the flowers that grant color to the player, while others steal the firing capability of man-made cannons found in the environment. The narrator introduces the monsters as Born’s brothers and sisters from the Void, but also says that Born should not pity them, and instead should kill them when possible to avoid his own demise.

Breakdown

Overall, *Nihilumbra* has a darkly philosophical air to its narrative, consistently voicing doubts about Born’s abilities and existence, concern for the world destroyed in his wake, and sureties that Born does not belong in the world. At several points, the narration lends itself to deeply impactful metaphors regarding depression, grief, or failure, or even simple commentary on interacting with the world and comprehending one’s own abilities while in such a compromised state of mind. However, the game still falls into cliché at times and occasionally takes a bit too literalist turn to allow for a strictly philosophical reading of the overall narrative.

In the introduction within the Void, the Narrator speaks to the small form of Born, claiming he “shouldn’t be alive,” “will never escape from this place,” and because of his nature, Born does not belong in the world he seeks and cannot ultimately “forsake the Void.” The narration does have a bit of a tongue-in-cheek line of “this is not a game,” but otherwise introduces the player to a dark, inhospitable world reinforced by the deep, somber voice-acting and the oppressive visual environment. This grounds the player in Born’s place of origin, clearly setting the stakes for the rest of the game, while also planting the idea that Born truly does belong in this place, as it serves as the most easily-traversed section of the game by its nature as the tutorial area.

When Born first enters the Frozen Cliffs, the Narrator remains largely separate from him, giving advice on the game mechanics, where to go next, and offering basic descriptions of events like Born's escape and the Void's approach. However, when Born learns his first color, the Narrator describes Born's emotional state and inner thoughts for the first time, reflecting the beginning of a shift in perspective and the growth of Born as his own complete being. As the chapter progresses and Born gains greater mastery over his first color, the narration transitions from primarily tutorial-style hints and explanations to inner thoughts and doubts. Notably, after first receiving the color the Narrator says "You are fascinated. This place is magical." However, after an entire tutorial-focused chapter, the tone quickly shifts to lines like:

You feel so cold because you are empty.
You are nothing. Nothing at all.
You are not fast enough.
You are not strong enough.
You are not agile enough...
It's an inhospitable world. You are not part of it...
Everything is against you...
You are alone.

Rather fitting to a newly formed creature struggling to survive against the odds in a frozen wasteland, the Narrator expresses extreme doubt, negativity, and concern, only rarely offering tokens of redemption like "I guess you are smart enough." However, as appropriate as the tone seems to Born and his situation, the question of the Narrator's origin and motivation remains, allowing the player to wonder how much of this negativity is internal, and how much it represents a potentially external antagonist trying to thwart their goal of continued progress. Alternatively, and most interesting to the abstract possibilities of the narrative, the Narrator can represent a mixture of both, serving as the voice of doubt within Born himself, which Born must conquer in order to thrive and escape the Void. This final possibility also gives a reason for the Narrator's fluctuating tone and helpfulness, as Born struggles within himself between his self-doubt and his will to survive.

In the Forest, the Narrator takes a lighter tone, telling Born and the player to "forget about the frozen mountains" and remarking:

You feel something strange here. Something wonderful, and new...
This place is warmer...
You don't feel as cold.
Maybe you are not as empty as before.
Maybe there's something growing within you.

While the Void still presents an ever-present threat and the Narrator still expresses some moments of melancholy, the forest exudes life, captivating and encouraging both Born and the player in their journey and giving the narrative a new sense of hope after the Void and the frozen wastes of the mountain. The tone of the story swings upwards for the first extended time since Born's creation, culminating in the line "Maybe you are alive too. You can think... that means that you exist, doesn't it? This place could be your home." After two colors and almost two full chapters of experience, Born feels the potential to belong and a sense of his own existence. Even the color for the forest conveys the sense

of heightened emotion. While the blue of the mountain gave Born increased speed and agility in his escape, the green of the forest allows him to bounce, conserving that increased momentum and reaching higher places than he could previously access. However, Born's spike of positivity and realization cannot last for too long, as the Void approaches, destroying the forest and sending Born back into a string of negative thoughts:

Fear.
Death.
Oblivion.
Surrender.
Are you sure about escaping?
Will you doom this forest as well?
There's nothing to do.

Moving on to the Ash Desert, Born learns brown, allowing him to stick to surfaces and thus sneak past certain monsters or combine his new power with green to climb over any wall. Here, Born slows down from his frantic escape and discovery, contemplating the nature of his journey. He finds a balance between his doubt and his desire, as the Narrator muses:

Learning new colors, traveling around the world...
It makes you grow up. It makes you want to live.
Being chased, condemning the world you leave behind...
It makes you feel terribly guilty. It makes you want to die.

While the desert certainly does not have the same atmosphere of life as the forest, it still does not reach the barrenness of the mountain. Similarly, the Narrator does not express any long trains or high points of positive thought, but neither does he fall into the negativity and doubt that plagued the beginning of the journey. Even as the Void approaches and destroys the desert, the Narrator recognizes "It is so sad... but you can't die just now. You are just starting to live." For the first time, the Void's presence does not bring despair alone, but also a further resolve to escape and survive. The tone evens out during this chapter, recognizing the unsustainability of continuous highs and lows and the necessity for Born to grow, understand, and temper his emotions and outlook on the world and himself.

After the desert, Born finds himself in the volcanic fields, a dangerous and burning place where he discovers red and the power to harm his enemies and remove obstacles from his path. At this point, having accepted and desiring to defend his own existence, Born actively takes steps to defeat his enemies, rather than simply running or hiding from them. With this new ability, the focus shifts from Born and his inner growth to the environment and the monsters, trending towards the potentially dangerous territory of forgetting the importance of earlier growth in the face of new offensive power. When Born learns this new color, the Narrator comments that "Every time you gain a new power... you temporarily forget about your problems. About your guilt." The game warns against focusing solely on new powers at each point of acquisition, instead encouraging attention towards all abilities based on what each situation requires. However, this particular acquisition feels uniquely pointed, as Born is "not harmless

anymore. They will never underestimate you again... You feel invincible.” Soon after learning the power of fire, Born encounters a new enemy from the Void, this one capable of sweeping away any color placed by Born, unaffected by his new weapon unless used in conjunction with the cannons placed throughout the level to enhance their power and rate of fire. Upon mastering this combination and killing the creature, the Narrator remarks “I guess nobody is invincible,” a shift from his earlier statement that this type of monster has “no weaknesses at all.” While at that moment, the narration certainly referred to the monster, the word invincible recalls the earlier description of Born’s assessment of his own abilities, warning against such a feeling, even after gaining a long-awaited weapon. Throughout the rest of the game, Born’s progression through the environments still focuses heavily on navigation using his other colors, using fire only rarely to defeat enemies or light the path. Ultimately, while Born must learn how to fight against the Void and its spawn, his most valuable abilities still center around himself and the colors acquired during his phases of personal growth and self-realization. When the Void comes, Born has an even stronger conviction than before that he deserves to live, but the string of negativity returns, enflamed by the relentless approach of the Void and the focus on combat as he destroys the creatures once described as his “brothers and sisters” while the Void wipes out the volcano in his wake. As the chapter closes and Born escapes, the Narrator says:

You must run.

You will prevail. The land will perish.

Guilt.

Remorse.

Regret.

You had to do it. It’s not your fault. You had no choice.

Finally, Born enters the city, the first non-natural environment in the game, aside from the arguable example of the Void. Here Born also recognizes a “majestic and magnificent” landscape created by something outside of the Void, but also requiring the same sort of destruction he inadvertently wrought on the world by his escape. While Born still feels some remorse for the destruction, he recognizes that good can come from it, and that his life is worth the cost. He no longer feels alone in his journey. As much as he could grow and discover his own existence and worth by himself through his personal journey out in the world, surety in his path could only come from companionship, even if those that followed the same path as him lived and left long before his arrival. However, such company also carries a cost, primarily from comparing himself to those that came before. While their destruction created the city, his has borne no fruits so far beyond his own self and his experiences. This realization sparks a final wave of remorse and negativity as the Void encroaches a final time, causing Born to question how separate he really is from the Void as an agent of destruction and if he ever really had a choice in his actions at all, or if he existed in a similar fashion as the monsters, sent out from the Void solely to propagate death upon the world. Ultimately, Born arrives at the realization that inherent in choice is responsibility, and that he must face the Void directly if he truly cares for the world around him and wants to exist as anything other than this agent of destruction. However, after all that Born has experienced and become, the Void rejects him. As the Narrator explains:

Everything you experienced has filled you. You are not empty anymore.
The Void is nothing and it has nothing to claim from you.
There's no void inside you.
Now you can go. You deserve your own life.
You are free at last.

As a rule, endings present the most difficult challenge in constructing narrative, and it seems no different for *Nihilumbra*. The game hints throughout at abstract meaning and personal growth. The Void can stand for a number of inner demons, among them the looming threat of suicide or the descent back into addiction or grief. If the colors each represent a stage of personal growth or emotion, the monsters may easily represent negative emotions and circumstances that drive the player back towards the Void, some with less warning, greater speed, or more inevitability than others. Notably, the nearly invincible Klimeth monster that sweeps up colors resembles a state of depression: a large, slow moving beast of inevitable advance that can only be avoided or defeated through a mixture of internal force and external assistance. However, *Nihilumbra* falls just short of its potential in this vein of metaphorical significance as it wraps the story up with a bit of cliché:

Now you understand.
There's no world without Void.
There's no light without darkness.
And there's no life...
...without death.
Life is not a simple journey.
Every action has consequences.

After such an abstract and thought-provoking journey, such an end feels lacking in its forced profundity, as if it felt the need to draw everything nicely into a neat point with a bow, when life and the struggles presented during the rest of the game rarely end so perfectly. While there is some satisfaction in escaping from the Void at last, perhaps the story could have ended more poignantly if left at “Fear. Remorse. Responsibility. Fate. Now you understand.” Rather than expounding on the grand point afterwards, the Narrator would simply leave the player in the knowledge of their journey and its consequence, standing at the edge of the world with the Void peering over their shoulder.

Strongest Element

Nihilumbra's greatest strength lies in its abstract nature. Throughout the game, the narration remains simple enough and largely speaks to the inner voice and growth of Born, allowing players to layer their own meanings on top of the story presented. The few dull moments in the narration tend to be either tutorial hints, unavoidable to some extent but perhaps not quite necessary in the amount included, or literal descriptions of the game's events focused solely around Born's immediate actions and the Void's approach. The narrative deals with very significant topics surrounding life, death, purpose, consequence, and perseverance, while generally avoiding telling the player exactly what to think about these subjects.

Unsuccessful Element

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Highlight

When playing *Nihilumbra*, the most memorable moment was a small point quite early in the game of relatively little significance to the grand story. While Born masters his first color and traverses the frozen mountain, the Narrator continues his trend thus far of negative commentary and discouraging the player from continuing. As the player encounters terrain and puzzles requiring different uses of their new power, the Narrator tells them “You are not fast enough. You are not strong enough. You are not agile enough.” Each time, the player and Born pass the challenge and progress onwards in their journey, unaffected by the Narrator’s pessimistic outlook. Finally, after proving mastery of this first ability, the Narrator concedes “I guess you are smart enough.” That particular line stands out as the point of recognition of Born’s abilities, of his capability of existence outside the Void not through any trait given to him from his origin, but through his wits and experience. Even with so many situations requiring good reflexes, *Nihilumbra* is ultimately a story-centric puzzle game, where the player must figure out how to progress by intelligently using the powers at their disposal. This line recognizes that such intelligence is the single most important attribute needed to progress, regardless of any challenge the environment may present. Later on in the story, the Narrator reinforces this line by saying “You can think... that means that you exist, doesn’t it?”, presenting a rephrasing of Descartes’ classic “I think, therefore I am” for the situation. Ultimately, this is the seed of Born’s existence, separate from the Void, an affirmation of the game’s entire journey and narrative, as well as the traits needed from the player in order to complete the game’s challenges.

Critical Reception

Nissa Campbell’s review of *Nihilumbra* for TouchArcade (4.5/5) calls the story “melancholy” and “compelling,” though with “a few clichés brought to bear before the

end.” Jshuen’s review for IGN (9.7/10) took a similar tone with phrases like “haunting, yet beautiful” and “fantastic tone and presentation,” also bringing up the white text that appears on screen as Narrator captions to drive the story and the journey overall forward. Both reviews tend to focus more on gameplay than narrative, as the simple mechanics are a primary draw of the game, but recognize the key role the narrative plays in the tone of the game.

Focusing more on narrative and the philosophical aims of *Nihilumbra*, Matthew Codd’s review for NZGamer (8.5/10) concludes that it is “ironically, one of the most meaningful games you’ll play.” Codd points out the background theme of existential nihilism throughout the game expressed in a simple narrative “heavily laden with symbolism” that “doesn’t quite achieve the depth it sets out to, but comes darn close,” as Born’s attempt to escape the Void parallels anyone’s attempt to find meaning and purpose in an apparently purposeless life. Additionally, Codd compliments BeautiFun on incorporating this theme into the gameplay elements, rather than leaving the story as a separate entity, and actively including the player in the experience as a participant instead of a simple observer of the protagonist’s journey.

Lessons

- When creating a profound or philosophical title, simplicity and abstraction serves better than a complex narrative that would obscure the primary themes and prevent the player from easily deriving their own meaning and interpretations. As stated previously, *Nihilumbra* largely remains abstract and falters only when it focuses too literally on the game events or forces a grander meaning at the end.
- An ending may work best if left slightly open. If given a choice between ending a philosophical/abstract game with a neat moral or leaving it slightly ambiguous, the overall tone and profundity of the game likely benefits from the ambiguous ending. Leaving some room for interpretations allows players to continue their own narrative and thoughts, while avoiding the risk of cliché moralizing.
- Short lines, phrases, or words best convey impactful narrative and thoughts. *Nihilumbra* almost always utilizes short pieces of text and speech throughout the game between puzzles and bits of action, giving players something interesting to focus on while not requiring their attention away from primary gameplay for too long.
- Protagonists do not need long and complicated backstories or personalities to feel impactful, relatable, or invested. Born is quite simply a blob of Void that generally takes a roughly humanoid shape and struggles with the meaning of existence. At a fundamental level, more players can easily relate to this type of character than an epic hero with a tragic past and a magnificent destiny.
- Emotional arcs should not last for too long, and they should return to a fairly neutral state for tension release at some point. While the introductory chapters showcase extreme highs and lows in Born’s thought process and estimation of himself, the narrative finds a steady neutral zone for the middle chapter that allows players to process the information and progress so far and move into the final stages of the journey with a firmer grasp on Born’s personal growth and motivations.

Summation

Ultimately, *Nihilumbra* is a deeply interesting philosophical game, addressing themes of nihilism and teasing metaphors for almost any substantial struggle in life. While it does not quite reach its full potential because of clichéd missteps at the end, it overall does an excellent job of simple, abstract narrative conveying deep themes and ideas. Its core gameplay mechanics support the narrative beautifully, as does the haunting visual atmosphere and quality voice acting.