

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: *Diaries of a Spaceport Janitor*
Platform: Windows, Mac
Genre: Adventure
Release Date: September 16, 2016
Developer: Sundae Month
Publisher: tinyBuild
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Bradford Horton

Overview

Diaries of a Spaceport Janitor is a reflective anti-adventure game about how eating an eyeball can change your life- Play as the Janitor, an alien girlbeast who wanders the spaceport (sometimes salvaging, sometimes eating, but mostly-) incinerating garbage. Embark on municipally-subsidized adventures like: getting catcalled by slime sharks, window shopping for swords you can never use (let alone afford), browsing alien porn, or going to bed hungry. Every day starts with a small prayer to your favored goddess at your Praystation IX, and ends with a short entry in your diary. Rooted in routine and riddled with inscrutable lesser magics, *Diaries* boasts an overwhelming and colorful world that lives and breathes entirely on its own accord. Do you have what it takes to stand up to the tide of spaceport grime? To make a meager livelihood peddling trash? Can you break your curse, or harder still, break the cycle of your day-to-day routine?

Characters

Below is just a small smattering of the diverse characters that populate the spaceport. One of the game's shining strengths is that it allows the player to feel like a citizen in a big and busy world humming with trade, gossip, and most of all, garbage.

- **The Janitor** – The player character, the Janitor is a gendershifting Alaensee sanidrone paid to scrape the ooze from the relentlessly grimy surface of the spaceport. The Janitor lives in a shabby apartment above a smut shop and rocks a yellow cap and matching yellow goulashes.
- **The Skull** – A woeful curse and/or best friend, the Skull is just that: a floating

skull that follows the player around, screaming and sapping their luck, as floating skulls are wont to do. (For what it counts, the Skull *does* eventually apologize for its bad behavior.)

- **Necress Aaata** – A prophetic witch who deals in divinations, Aaata lurks outside your apartment and provides cryptic but appreciated counsel re: the Skull Curse and how to break it- *“Heed my counsel, custodian, or suffer a terribly tedious existence!”*
- **Heather** – Heather wields a set of rainbow daggers and supplies dungeon-going adventurers with the eyeballs they need to gain passage through the sewer gates.
- **Shifty Salamot** – Shifty Salamot (of the Chemdrain Backalley) has a good reputation for having an absolutely filthy reputation. Dealing in poisons, xenome jellies, and weaponized blubbers, Shifty’ll pay a fair price for whatever dubious substances you manage to dredge from the dumpsters.
- **Dungeon Sage Orloqq** – Orloqq can be found in their bookshop, Orloqq’s Bookhole, of which they are tremendously proud. Whether a retired adventurer themselves, or perhaps just an avid reader of adventure tales, Orloqq is a wellspring of reputable questing advice. They ultimately recommend that you to find an adventurer to take on the curse on your behalf, as opposed to trying to break it yourself.
- **??? (Dirt Girl)** – A hissing, sluglike creature who lives in a pile of dirt in the Yellow District back-alley, Dirt Girl is the only character in the entire game (to my knowledge) willing to pay municipal credits for dirt.
- **gNormo qReyd** – Affectionately known as “Container Guy,” gNormo is obsessed with collecting empty containers.t
- **The Nine Goddesses** – Denizens of luck and misfortune alike, the goddesses impart their favor on those who leave offerings at their shrines, each with their own domain amidst the many stalls and alleys of the bazaar. They’re stitched inseparably into the fabric of the world, creating a sense of invisible boundaries and an awareness of your constantly fluctuating luck factor, ticking up every time you stop to pray or deprecating every time you accidentally step on a cursed sidewalk sigil.
 - **Onas** – Goddess of interiors, time, and the cosmos. White garbed and graceful.
 - **Sprense** – Goddess of curses, enchantments, and rituals. A hovering orb, Sprense’s holy curvature betrays no emotion.
 - **Delvine** – My personal favorite; goddess of traps, monsters, and peril. She wields a variety of dazzling gem-encrusted weapons in her many arms and would probably make an amazing Dungeon Master.
 - **Vala** – Goddess of daring, courage, and discipline.
 - **Beb** – Goddess of good luck, poverty, and random numbers. Beb is a plump and smiling denizen with countless eyes, which adventurers will consume before entering dungeons for blessing.
 - **Lauster** – Goddess of loot, influence, and good deals. Lauster balances

stacks of shining gold coins on their arms.

- **Aggra Mona** – Goddess of romance, family, and generosity. Her beauty is said to strike debilitating fear and desire into the hearts of those who behold her.
- **Havalana** – Goddess of lust, birth, and death. She cocoons herself in a shimmering net whose barbs snare on the fabric of bodies and souls alike.
- **Thedelule** – Goddess of music, drugs, and celebration.
- **Rhiande** – Aaata’s twin, Rhiande is a collector of accursed items. She’ll hand over a shard of the Skull curse’s instructional tablet in exchange for a complete set of nine holy idols.
- **The Redscarves** - The menacing law enforcers of the spaceport. It’s unclear exactly from where they derive their authority, but (in space as on earth) bumping into them is probably a bad idea. At best, you’ll escape with a scolding; at worst, they’ll help themselves to whatever credits you have on your person.
- **Heroes** – The spaceport is full of heroes caught between adventures, resting up and restocking before the heartbeat of their own narrative engine carries them off on another great expedition.
 - **I_AM_TECHNUS** – A socially awkward technoknight, jailbroken to be an adventurer. I_AM_TECHNUS will bear your curse in exchange for five megabatteries.
 - **Ali Yaga** – Thief / “secondhand adventurer” in search of rare magical artifacts, she’s either too smart or too cautious to venture into the sewerdungeons herself, and prefers to pick the pockets of loot-laden adventurers. Ali will bear your curse in exchange for a mythic spellswatch
 - **Vehva the Pilot** – Vehva is a sci-fi cliché and they know it. They hang around the Quadra Hangar in Green District, smoking space cigs and just looking generally nonchalant. They’ll bear your curse in exchange for 600 municipal credits.

Breakdown

Spaceports, like highway rest stops or 2AM grocery stores, are liminal spaces, in-between places with a flexible sense of time and geography. They aren’t meant to be lived in so much as they’re meant to be passed through. The Janitor, as they are introduced, hopes one day to leave the spaceport, but are trapped by routine, by the mundane. It’s a clever defiance of the hero’s journey, in which the protagonist initially resists the pull of adventure, hesitant to abandon their ordinary world. The spaceport map actually loops around on itself, meaning that if you walk in a straight line forever, you’ll end up in an infinite circle. The Janitor, like most players-of-games, is constantly on the lookout for rabbit holes, quest markers, anything that might trailhead an adventure, and thus an escape from the daily slog. Wake up, pray to your favored goddess, incinerate garbage, eat your nutrient chalk... sleep, rinse and repeat. Videogames are made up of positive and negative feedback loops, but *Diaries* is just made of plain ol’ loops with no real inclination positive OR negative. The fact is that no evil Koopa King, no GLaDOS, no

Calamity Ganon could ever measure up to the crushing existential horror of a dead-end job.

It's this fear, this deep and powerful craving for a conquerable goal, a discrete antagonist as opposed to a vague and messy network of institutional oppressors, that leads the Janitor to delve into the sewerdungeons below the city. They scarf down an eye of Beb for good luck and descend in search of adventure. The peculiar properties of the eye cause your camera view to switch temporarily from third to first person. The player follows the current to a mysterious room boasting statues of the nine goddesses, and a lone skull perched atop a display podium. You touch the Skull (of course) and it screams for the first but certainly not last time. When you next awake, the camera has returned to its regular third person orientation, and the Skull hovers menacingly over your shoulder, screaming occasionally. This radical shift in POV/camera-type makes it feel almost like the game is switching genre, if only for a moment. For a brief minute, the Janitor is an adventurer. The Janitor is an agent. The Janitor is defying their routine and, with it, their narrative designation. But then of course, they snap back to a third person camera, a simple custodian who ate a holy eyeball one afternoon and woke up with a curse.

Resident witch, Necress Aaata, informs you that you have been cursed, and that your new calcium-rich companion will be a tax on your luck until said curse has been broken. The Janitor sets off to find three shards of the Skull's instructional tablet, scattered across the spaceport. You aren't provided with a map or compass, and must rely on colored sidewalk arrows to navigate the crowded streets. The first few hours of the game feel very much like the experience of moving to a new city. Day after day, you start to recognize key landmarks- the massive Sword of Xerveen (plunged into the concrete by some long-gone giant), the Verdant Overlook (a grassy patch feat. a shrine to weekend goddess, Thedelule), and many more. You track down NPCs, not via objective markers, but by asking around, talking to strangers on street corners, injecting yourself into the rumor mill! The charm of it all is intoxicating, dangerous even- at one point I forgot my skull quest entirely, swept up in garbage collection and exploration. Collecting the three tablet shards proves difficult when you've scarcely got enough credits at the end of the day for vending machine nutrient chalk.

The first shard can be found in the possession of a Red District slime with very particular taste in smut. They'll gladly hand it over in exchange for alien snuff mags. The second piece demands that you return to the sewerdungeons and brave the slime while being hunted by a screeching demon who sounds suspiciously like the THX logo sound. The third and final shard you get from Rhiande, at the foot of Delvine's Ziggurat, in payment for a set of nine idols in the image of the nine goddesses. With the tablet assembled, the Janitor seeks guidance from Dungeon Sage Orloqq who, to their dismay, insists that attempting to break the curse themselves is a fruitless errand. Orloqq recommends that you track down one of three travelling heroes and somehow convince them to take on the curse in your stead. (Most of this, however, takes a backseat to the burning and eating of garbage.) Since the player is filling a narrative role normally delegated to NPCs, this is a rare instance of a *citizen/background-type* character approaching the *hero* for open-world quest assignment instead of vice versa. When you

succeed in ridding yourself of the Skull, there's no fanfare, no trumpetsong. You just finish off your day as usual, down a space Soylent, and go to bed-

The Skull wakes you up in the night and, for the very first time, speaks to the Janitor: *"Look, I know I've been a pain in the ass, and I want to apologize. You know how curses are... I sort of had to hang around you... and scream... you know? So I'm sorry. But... I feel like I know you pretty well, from floating right next to you constantly."* It confides that it fears you'll never be happy if you remain stuck here in the spaceport and invites you to join it (and the adventurer you hired) when they depart later that evening. The Janitor follows the Skull, the same Skull that they worked so hard to get rid of, to the Hangar, where they pass over a miniature of the spaceport, walking ghostlike through the air until the credits start to scroll- It's very important to me that the game ends on an optimistic note. It overtly resists the pattern of gritty, skeptical dystopia which clutter the cyberpunk and science fiction genres. True, the Skull might have dragged down your luck quotient, but it ultimately provided the Janitor with a quest, with an adventure, and ultimately, with an escape. (The *Diaries* spaceport is, truly, the queer scifi dystopia of my dreams.)

Strongest Element

Diaries of a Spaceport Janitor excels at creating a lavishly populated world whose ambiguous sense of causality creates a breeding ground for superstition. The entire spaceport is a petri dish of slime and magic. Your luck factor is constantly in flux, being tallied and re-tallied by some great invisible machine. At one point, I found myself meticulously arranging and rearranging salvaged idols of the nine goddesses, on a shelf in my apartment, hoping different orderings might gain me favor with a particular deity. If I was having money troubles, I'd carry a fetish of Lauster in my inventory... I have no clue whether or not any of this did anything. Players pick up their own little routines and habits. They find their own favorite vending machines and food stalls, and take detours to hit up all the goddess shrines. I amassed a collection of absolutely worthless imp treasure simply because I thought the sprites were pretty. The uncertainty and confusion of the world contributes to a feeling of player citizenship, and forces you to believe in magic (with little to no feedback!) and to have faith in unseen systems, which I felt to be a truly radical idea.

Unsuccessful Element

The game is often by design confusing, frustrating, *boring* even. This is fine- games have no inherent responsibility to be fun, and player dropoff in a relatively open-world game is not necessarily a problem, but it does make for a cavernous experience split between those who finish the game and those who do not. Player retention in the space between the title/tutorial and what could reasonably be considered the third act is a real challenge. Balancing and defying player expectation, in a game that applauds and

defiles the adventure genre in the span of sentences, is an ambitious undertaking for a game whose emotional experience goals include anger and helplessness. It's important that players be upset *in the context of the fiction* (and the power structures represented therein), and not in the meta sense of decrying the game simply for not being fun.

Highlight

My best moment, hands down, was earning the “Romanceable” trophy by selling four piles of dirt to Dirt Girl. Maybe I was just imagining things, but I could've sworn that for a moment, her hostile hisses sounded at least marginally more benevolent... dare I say *affectionate*? (Other delightful achievements include “Sick Burn,” awarded for incinerating 50 pools of vomit, and “Rags to Worse Rags,” for which you must wake up poor and go to bed poorer.)

Critical Reception

Diaries is a curious beast, hard to define, maybe even harder to review. First impressions range from “off-putting” to “delightful.” The fact of the matter is, *Diaries* is a really terrible adventure game, but it's not trying to be a great adventure game. This mislabeling is an intentional deception, since the game leverages player expectation in both narrative and gameplay. [Gareth Marin of Killscreen](#) is a fast fan, and points out how *Diaries* connects the ideas of luck and privilege in a world where the rich and powerful seem to consistently attribute their status to hard work. He awards the game a 78/100 for its honest but gentle portrayal of a life lived in immediate goals, in moments between paychecks-

“So when chance swings your way on a Theday, and the city comes alive with the tootling of alien trumpets and throngs with every creature you might imagine, it's possible to rise above the trash, to appreciate the world for what it might be. Even on rainy mornings, where lightning whites out the single window of your scrappy flat, lanterns glowing green by the ceiling, there is a certain melancholic satisfaction to be felt, an appreciation of the process of being alive.”

Meanwhile, [Alec Meer of Rock Paper Shotgun](#) tackles the conflict of finding your own place within a game at odds with itself. His experience in the *Diaries* spaceport is that of a tourist; he's happy to wander the streets and pick up trash for an hour or so, but displays little interest in the long-term commitment involved in becoming a digital citizen and chasing the skull quest to its end.

“Half of me wants to say that it's a fountain of ingenuity and otherworldly sight-seeing, but half of me wants to say it's like being assaulted by every scribbled note and doodle from someone's filled Moleskin notepad. Diaries can feel overwhelming, in all its flashing colours, all its noise, all its teased possibilities of what this item or that location

might mean, and though I admire the hell out of the richness of ideas, overwhelming can become, well, tiresome.”

Lessons

- **You Aren’t Owed an Explanation:** As interactive-literacy soars, there’s an increasing appeal to not having your hand held. Tooltips are tedious and tutorials tend towards condescending. There’s magic in experimentation!
- **If Your Big Bad Can Be Killed with a Gun They Probably Aren’t That Big or Bad:** The scariest antagonists of all are the indifferent and oppressive mechanisms of the world around you.
- **“You Got Fantasy in my Science Fiction!” “You Got Science Fiction in my Fantasy!”:** Hybrid worlds make for richer genre fiction.
- **Ditch the Solipsism:** Make sure your world doesn’t exist for the player character to farm into obsolescence.
- **Alternate Power Fantasies:** Saving the world is great and all, but I’m ready for more games about the power and pride in just keeping your head above the water.

Summation

Diaries of a Spaceport Janitor is among a meager handful of games I’ve played which *do not* prioritize player power fantasy. The greatest victory any of us can hope for is escape from our routine, which admittedly can be both a saving grace and a vicious trap in a cruel and unpredictable world. (*Diaries* may be unforgiving, but it’s not judgmental.) The world around you teases at adventure, at a world of heroes for whom the designation of hero is a metanarrative superpower in its own right, but you live on a different scale, in your own sub-world with its own stakes, loops, and vocabulary. It’s messy, it’s overwhelming, but it’s also hopeful. What else could you possibly want or ask from a game about garbage?



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finally finished diaries of a spaceport jan
geez!! what a good game abt barfing all
town + befriending the broken parts of u

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