

Game Narrative Review

Game Title: Grim Fandango

Platform: PC

Genre: 3rd-Person Adventure

Release Date: September 30, 1998

Developer: Lucas Arts

Publisher: Lucas Arts

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Tim Schafer

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Overview

Grim Fandango is a film-noir epic set in the Land of the Dead, a dark, dangerous afterlife that's equal parts Aztec religion and Casablanca. A hardboiled purgatory between earth and heaven, the Land of the Dead is populated by the restless souls of the deceased (represented by skeletal calaca figures) who must make a dangerous four-year journey to the Land of Eternal Rest.

Players assume the role of Manny Calavera, a grim reaper for the Department of Death, whose job involves freeing souls from their mortal coil and selling them swanky travel packages like sports cars and luxury cruises to aid them on their trip to heaven. Premium clients are eligible for a ticket on the Number Nine, a mystical bullet train that whisks the pure-of-spirit to heaven in four minutes instead of four years. If Manny wants to work off his sins in his previous life and score a seat on the Number Nine, he's going to need to start selling some tickets, and fast.

But business has been terrible, with Manny unable to sell decent packages to his clients. When his latest commission, the kind and beautiful Meche Colomar, doesn't qualify for the Number Nine seat she clearly deserves, Manny begins to suspect that someone in the Department of Death is rigging the system. Manny's attempt to clear Meche's name and earn himself a fat paycheck quickly becomes a descent into the corrupt underworld of the afterlife and a quest for justice, redemption, and love.

Characters

- **Manuel "Manny" Calavera**

A travel agent in the afterlife who can't leave his dead-end job until he's worked off some time to the "powers that be," Manny is a grim reaper tasked with selling flashy travel packages to souls beginning their four year journeys. When we first meet Manny, he's been given the ultimatum of landing a premium client or losing his job and any hope of working off his sins.

- **Mercedes "Meche" Colomar**
A modern-day saint and Manny's ticket to salvation, Meche should have been a shoo-in for the Number Nine, but someone doctored her file and stole her ticket to heaven. Left with no choice but to make her four-year journey on foot, Meche sets off unprotected into the seedy back alleys of the afterlife. Manny's quest to find her serves as his main character motivation for the majority of the game.
- **Glottis**
A true speed "demon", Glottis is an elemental spirit summoned to work as an auto mechanic for the Department of Death. Obsessed with souped-up cars, there's nothing he loves more than putting the pedal to the metal and feeling the wind in his face. Fired from his job, he joins Manny in the search for Meche, quickly becoming Manny's closest friend.
- **Domino Hurley**
A fellow reaper at the Department of Death and Manny's main competition, Domino is ruthlessness and corruption wrapped in a power suit. Arrogant and self serving, he'd push an old lady down a flight of stairs if it meant a promotion. In fact, he's part of a crime ring that steals Number Nine tickets and sells them on the black market. Over the course of the game, Domino becomes the most prominent antagonist, transitioning from a devious businessman to a homicidal goon.
- **Hector LeMans**
The arch villain, Hector is a criminal mastermind who robs deserving souls of their tickets to heaven. Bloated and sadistic, he's built an empire of crime by stealing Number Nine tickets and selling them to the highest bidder. The tickets he sells, however, are counterfeits: his true goal is to steal enough Number Nine tickets to qualify his rotten soul for a trip to the Land of Eternal Rest.

Breakdown

Grim Fandango's linear narrative is divided into four acts, each covering a year in Manny's journey to find Meche and ultimately reach the Land of Eternal Rest. While searching for the woman he loves, Manny discovers that a criminal empire led by kingpin Hector LeMans is stealing Number Nine tickets from virtuous souls and selling them to the undeserving. Transforming from a lowly travel agent into a globe-trotting freedom fighter, Manny travels, quite literally, to the ends of the earth to find Meche and end LeMan's reign of greed.

By the end of the game, Manny gets the girl, kills the bad guy, and pretty much saves the day. If that sounds like a standard adventure story, that's because it is. Grim Fandango's narrative cleaves to tradition, but the story is far more than the sum of its parts due to a stellar cast of intriguing and delightful characters. From the good-natured and excitable Glottis to the demure and resilient Meche, every actor has a part to play and is imbued a distinct personality that sets them apart from their neighbors.

Special attention is paid to developing character arcs. Over the course of the game, Manny evolves from a good-natured corporate suit into a jaded, disillusioned maverick. Though Meche never loses her kind nature, three years in the hostile Land of the Dead

force her to grow a tough outer shell and even threaten Manny at gunpoint. When the game ends, you feel like you've spent years getting to know the cast.

Even characters of necessity are infused with charm. Need a balloon animal to solve a puzzle? You'll have to brave the acidic condescension of the balloon vendor. Want to smuggle yourself into a restaurant basement? Take advantage of the snooty waiter's extreme claustrophobia. Though some characters are more integral to the plot than others, all are interesting and none want for individuality and spark.

In addition to creating a complex and consistent universe and populating it with intriguing characters, Grim Fandango's narrative pacing also does an excellent job of introducing the player to an especially unfamiliar world. It's important to keep in mind that Grim Fandango's Day of the Dead setting is a far cry from the Anglo Saxon and Asian tropes most gamers are used to. A gloomy spaceship or a stately dojo is familiar territory, but put the player in an art-deco high rise overlooking a fantastical Mexican metropolis, and things can quickly become foreign and disorienting.

To ease the player into Grim Fandango's rich and complex world, the narrative cunningly parcels the puzzles and conversations so that the player's journey starts small and slowly increases in scope. Manny's first assignment, checking his mail, only requires a walk across his office. As the puzzles ratchet up in intensity and the narrative expands, Manny must leave his office, explore the building, wander around a city block, leave the city, and eventually move to another town. By the time Manny has traveled nearly halfway around the world in his search for Meche, the player feels almost at home in the Land of the Dead.

Despite remaining linear through the entire game, Grim Fandango's narrative manages to convey a sense of scale and community usually associated with open-world games. By constructing a coherent, fleshed-out world with its own set of rules and customs and filling it with eclectic, three-dimensional characters, Grim Fandango's narrative transports players to a universe both fantastical and familiar at the same time.

Strongest Element

The strongest element of Grim Fandango's narrative is the way Manny's expository dialogue creates an unspoken companionship between him and the player.

Unlike previous adventure game protagonists who could often employ all five senses via menu commands, Manny's means of interacting with his environment are limited to observation, conversation, picking up items, and using items. That means if Manny's not talking to someone, the vast majority of his lines are reflections on the outside world. For example, upon glancing at his office door, Manny comments "wasn't too long ago the name on that door was "supply closet"".

In other games this could easily become boring and vapid: listening to the main character go on about his surroundings for ten hours sounds like a recipe for disaster. In Grim Fandango's case, however, it works beautifully. It works because the narrative understands that Manny's exposition not only informs the player, but also subtly builds a conversational relationship between player and protagonist. When the player tells Manny to look at something, be it an important item or an interesting piece of scenery, the unspoken question in the player's mind falls along the lines of "What is this, what does it

do, or what does it mean?" Early in the game, Manny passes by a festival going on outside his office. If curious, the player can walk near the parade and press the action key, to which Manny replies "It's the festival of the Day of the Dead. Really more of a living person's holiday, but we play along." Though Manny's response is directed to no one in particular, what he's actually doing is addressing the player's question and opening a conversation.

This rapport, with the player asking questions and Manny indirectly replying, creates a subtle but incredibly important companionship between Manny and the player. Unlike an FPS, the player is never tricked into believing they are actually Manny Calavera, yet Manny is not an isolated and removed protagonist -- like Lara Croft or Assassin's Creed's Altair -- through which the player lives vicariously. Rather, Manny's dialogue turns him into the player's friend, a relationship which is difficult, if not impossible, to replicate outside of video games.

Unsuccessful Element

Despite masterminding the theft of the Number Nine tickets and eventually becoming the game's final antagonist, Hector LeMans is never fully realized as a villain. Sure, he does all the things a bad guy should, including murder, theft, and running an empire of crime, but Hector ultimately feels shallow and forced. Introduced early in the story and then dropped until the final chapter, he ultimately does little to earn the player's hatred. For all his moustache twirling, Hector never actually reaches out and influences the player's world, making his character the weakest of Grim Fandango's cast.

Highlight

After spending three years and two thirds of the game searching for Meche, Manny finds her on a mining colony at the edge of the world. Unlike a typical Hollywood reunion, Meche's appearance is abrupt and unsentimental. The afterlife has been hard on Meche, and her sweet, charming nature has been bricked over by a hostile shell. For the most part, the details of how she arrived on the island and what she's been doing for the last three years are left a mystery.

Normally, having an important character disappear for half the plot and reappear a very different person would be narrative suicide. But Meche's hiatus is a deliberate plot device which brilliantly serves two purposes. First, it mirrors real life. Hasn't everyone lost contact with an acquaintance, only to discover they've drastically changed during their time away? Second, by leaving much of Meche's story unknown, the plot provides a perfect set-up for a sequel without diluting the ending.

By the time the credits roll, all the characters' stories have been resolved. Purposely omitting a large chunk of the plot allows a writer to plan for a sequel without resorting to a cliché cliffhanger ending.

Critical Reception

Grim Fandango drew considerable praise from critics, particularly for its rich story and memorable cast of characters. Reviewers felt connected to the narrative, sympathized with the protagonists, and found it easy to lose themselves in the immersive and nuanced Land of the Dead. According to IGN's Trent C. Ward, "[Grim Fandango's] world is a rich

one, complete with its own laws, its own personality types, and landscapes."

Reviewers also complimented Grim Fandango's ability to balance a dark mystery with a healthy dose of humor. As GameSpot's Ron Dulin said, "[Grim Fandango] derives its humor from its situations and characters... without making fun of itself, helping to create a believable world."

Lessons

- Expository adventure game dialogue (ex. "this is a golden key") is more than a boring necessity: it's a chance to form an emotional bond with the player by treating the dialogue as a conversation between the player and the game's protagonist.
- Video game protagonists don't have to choose between being nondescript vessels for the player (think Gordon Freeman), or strangers through which the player lives vicariously (Lara Croft springs to mind). It's possible for a protagonist to be the player's companion, creating a narrative/audience relationship that is almost impossible to duplicate outside of video games.
- Villains have to earn our hatred. Simply announcing that the antagonist is a horrible person is not the same thing as creating a memorable enemy who truly impacts and alters the protagonist's story.

Summation

Beautiful graphics and clever puzzles make for fun gameplay, but by themselves are often transient and forgettable. Grim Fandango rises above mere eye-candy because it treats its world like a real place filled with real people. It takes its characters seriously, tells a story that connects to human emotions, and focuses on forging a bond between Manny and the player. By constructing a deep and layered narrative that fills a convincing setting with hilarious, articulate characters, Grim Fandango achieves the nigh-impossible task of creating a world that is utterly unique yet entirely believable.