

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Bully
Platform: PS3
Genre: Action-Adventure
Release Date: October 17, 2006
Developer: Rockstar
Publisher: Rockstar Games
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Dan Houser and Jacob Krarup

Overview

Bully is the one year experience of Jimmy Hopkins and his interactions when dropped off at Bullworth Academy by his distant mother and newly stepfather. Jimmy quickly, albeit reluctantly befriend Gary Smith and Petey Kowalski. As the school year progresses Jimmy's popularity and reputation are ever changing as various social groups in the academy and nearby town either respect or disrespect Jimmy's power and presence. As Jimmy you take out bullies and rivals, have classes to attend, mischief to cause, and peace to spread.

The game follows Jimmy's overall character development but also tracks the character growth of Gary, the final antagonist. As Jimmy's popularity reaches its climax mid game, Gary betrays Jimmy for his own motives causing Jimmy to fall into a trap resulting in expulsion. The remainder of the game is Jimmy investigating the betrayal, unknown to him at the time of his expulsion, and acting on the behalf of other students and town characters. The majority of the game take place in town allowing Jimmy plenty of room to complete the story portion of the game and explore.

Characters

- **Jimmy Hopkins**
The main character, player avatar, and antihero of the story of Bully. Jimmy Hopkins is not a hero on a mission to clean up other student's messes, rather his own as the story plays out. Jimmy goes from a juvenile thug working under Gary to the most popular and respect student at Bullworth until he realizes the problems that come with his momentary fame. Jimmy wants to be part of a group and as he develops in character

begins to figure out that being the toughest, smartest, or wealthiest makes him the bigger target.

- **Gary Smith**

The final and overall antagonist in the game. Gary is the campus anarchist and wants to rule the students of Bullworth. His character is depicted as being off his pills, which plays into his later egomaniac behavior. Gary is good at getting people to work for him and even better at pinning cliques against each other. He is responsible for setting up Jimmy and causing Jimmy's expulsion. Since Gary uses hired muscle to fight for him, his fighting skills are subpar but he can hold his own.

- **Petey Kowalski**

Petey is Jimmy's friend and ally. Petey is a short, shy, and soft-spoken young man. Throughout the game there are hints, rumors and jokes that suggest Petey may be gay or bisexual, though the character does not confirm or deny the claim. Gary subjects Petey to humiliation for his own amusement in exchange for allowing Petey to call him a friend." When Jimmy comes into his life and befriends him, Petey learns what it means to have an honest friend is.

- **Dr. Crabblesnitch**

The headmaster at Bullworth Academy. He is the definition of strictness and order. Dr. Crabblesnitch expels Jimmy Hopkins when he finds Jimmy guilty of vandalizing property and the mastermind of very dangerous pranks. When Jimmy clears his name and Gary is found out to be the perpetrator, Dr. Crabblesnitch expels Gary.

- **Russell Northrop**

When Jimmy arrives on campus, Russell is the campus head bully. Russell serves as the metaphorical snowball effect when Gary orchestrates Jimmy, who does not know he is hired muscle, to take out Russell. Russell fall from authority creates chaos in Bullworth's bully circle and the various clique leader want the title. When Russell loses against Jimmy, his title belongs to Jimmy. Later Russell becomes an ally to Jimmy until Jimmy's fall due to expulsion.

- **Zoe Taylor**

An expelled student living in the town and associating with the Townies. Zoe was expelled a year before Jimmy arrived at Bullworth when she accused a teacher of sexual harassment. She acts as Jimmy's romantic interest. She is a different female element to the game as she is not a stereotypical tomboy but not a cliché of feminine qualities.

- **The Cliques**

Bullies – The Bullies are the general campus thugs and brutes who are usually larger and intimidate underclassmen and Nerds. Bullies tend to be lower in intelligence than the other students are. Their untucked uniform shirts with rolled up sleeves can identify them since they wear nothing in terms of color identifiers like the other factions.

- **Nerds** – Stereotypical “lower food-chain” students. Their attire consists of variations of green sweater vests, childlike mannerisms when excitedly speaking about science or general studies, and the iconic glasses. Bullies constantly harass them. Their turf is the library.

- **Preppies** – Their clean cut appearance is the equivalent of wolves in sheep’s clothing. The wealthier and “stuck-up” students who call Bullworth Academy home wear light blue-checked sweater vest. Preppies have aversion towards Greasers primarily but also anyone they think, in terms of economic background, lessens Bullworth’s “prestigious” reputation.

- **Greasers** – Thick black biker jackets and greased hair identify these troublemakers. They are at times dramatic and over threatening. Their hangout is the campus auto shop.

- **Jocks** – Stereotypical athletic students attending Bullworth Academy. Letterman jackets and cheerleader uniforms help identify these students. Their area is the gym.

- **Townie** – Youth not belonging or affiliated with a campus clique with Bullworth Academy but are residents of the small towns in the game.

Breakdown

Bully begin with Jimmy being dropped out by his distant mother and newly stepfather. Jimmy is presented as being disrespectful to both parents in a sense of rebellion and his parent retort with teasing, in truth, of leaving him at Bullworth Academy for a year while they go on a cruise. Delivering the negative picture of Jimmy’s home life sets the stage of the game as Jimmy tries to make the best of his young life.

Dr. Crabblesnitch attempts to intimidate Jimmy by reminding him of his failures of being kicked out of other schools and through sarcasm, but loves “teaching” and hopes to turn Jimmy into a model student and citizen. Jimmy does not have mutual feelings of change as Crabblesnitch demand but time changes everything.

When Jimmy enters his dorm, he meets Gary and Petey. Petey tries to befriend Jimmy who is not interested in making friend, having already gotten into a fight beforehand. Gary enters the scene and through the teasing or Petey and insulting Jimmy,

introduces himself completing the awkward triangle of “friends”. After the trio get used to each other the dual personality of Gary and Petey begin to establish foreshadowing. Gary is always collaborating with Jimmy to pin the various cliques against each other and to take out their “leaders”.

Jimmy’s first boss battle is against the top bully Russell. Gary betrays Jimmy and reveals his plan to run the school. It is here that Gary is at his most erratic and signs of his megalomaniac personality comes out. This is also where Jimmy realizes Petey’s true friendship. From here, Gary creates situations for Jimmy where he must attempt to reestablish peace with various cliques, clear up rumors, and prove his strength.

Bully has a variety of mini missions ranging from performing task for students to receive a reward or to strengthen a skill Jimmy can use. Various holidays like Halloween and Valentines have mini missions to test the player with the various mechanics that will aid in challenges to come. By talking to AI character Jimmy can learn about the happening in the town, what rumors are going around, and can at times flirt and kiss students.

In the game, Jimmy must attend classes at least twice a day until his expulsion. These classes aid in creating tools like stink bombs to escape situations or better communication skills to flirt or to taunt. Other secondary features include learning various fighting moves to subdue opponents versus simply boxing and dragging out the fight. Jimmy can wield a slingshot, which is on opponents as well as shooting targets for puzzles.

The game has elements of a sandbox game having mini missions. You can protect Nerds from harm or retrieve items for students. Being that Bullworth is a school, you have to go to class but the rewards for passing the puzzles aid in conversation, romance and other elements to make Bully an immersive experience. The game is broken into five chapter spanning over the year that Jimmy attends and is involved in Bullworth and the towns nearby. Five chapter and five major bosses broken down as the strongest of the bullies, the leader of the preppies, the strongest of the jocks, the leader of the greaser, and lastly Gary.

Strongest Element

The element of choice is the strongest element in the game. Critics assumed the game would glorify youth literally bullying, fighting, and using dishonest ethics to advance in the game. However, this is not the case. As Jimmy, you are not just a youthful thug but you are a young man who makes choices: to use his fist or words. Jimmy can follow the rules and be a stand-up young man when not having to defend himself.

Jimmy’s clothing choices also affect the cliques he interact with in the game. If he wears jock attire, the Jocks respect him more. This works with all the cliques as they see Jimmy as one of them. This allows the player to take on a persona through clothing. Rockstar lets the player live the argument of “clothes don’t make the man, a man makes the clothes”.

Unsuccessful Element

In *Bully*, Jimmy can kiss girl and boys. At least each clique has one boy Jimmy can kiss. This came as a huge surprise and many players and social activist responded negatively. There are rumors in the game that Petey's character is gay or bisexual. These character development themes attempt to flesh out characters and real life experiences for youth developing their sexuality. Rockstar probably assumed these story points were minor and did not expect there to be the backlash there was.

Evaluating the demographic of video gamer, the majority can be said to be middle age, white, and heterosexual. *Bully* was granted a teen rating and that was its target audience. This element was unsuccessful since it was unsuspected when players bought the game. Rockstar did not say Jimmy, or any character for that matter, was or is gay, bisexual, asexual or heterosexual. Rockstar left it up to the player to decide; they wanted a realistic window of possibility for youthful sexuality in *Bully*. Rockstar could have included that information in marketing or been the first to address to the topic rather than allowing critics and groups to protest against such beliefs.

Highlight

The best dialogue in the game is after Jimmy defeats Russell in a fight. This dialogue completes the foundation of the game's message.

Jimmy: You alright, Russell?
Russell: Yeah.
Jimmy: Look, I never said anything about your mom, or farm yard animals.
Russell: You didn't?
Jimmy: No. But I want you to stop bullying weak kids.
Russell: Why?
Jimmy: Because there are a bunch of kids around this place who need a beating and you're picking on the few who don't. So I want you to leave me and him alone.

This is the moment Jimmy realizes what he must do with the power he has and challenges Russell to do the same. Here the player realize that just because you have power or influence does not give you the right to belittle those who do not. Furthermore, those with power and influence should hold their peers who have the same to a higher standard and stop them when they abuse their power. This scene is where Jimmy makes the transition from a follower and begins to become a leader. This is scene is where Jimmy realizes that Gary is not a friend and does not have Jimmy's best interest at heart. Petey on the other hand, is a friend he can rely on.

Critical Reception

Aside the clichés and predictable stereotypes, *Bully* has a “coherent and engaging story”. S. Butts gave the rated-T game 7.8 out of 10. For the overall presentation, Butts Hnoted the story was good but relied on predictable elements, that graphics, sounds and

overall gameplay were clean and polished. In his opinion, Butts believes that the different cliques detract from the game “further reducing the story’s potential [1].

M. Reparaz gave *Bully* a higher score praising the variety in gameplay, the excellent writing and voice acting, and challenging the “school-game taboo” [2]. Reparaz quickly examines the highlights of *Bully*, such as in the choices to fight or to use words and protecting weaker characters. Reparaz enjoyed the use of going to class, the puzzles, and the roles these “classes” serves in the gameplay.

Lessons

The Positive

- Giving the player realistic choices makes the game immersive and leave an outcome of multiple experiences.
- Design the main character to have a foundation but allow the player to build upon that foundation. Let the player become the character and allow them to live vicariously.
- Use secondary characters to teach the player not how to play the game but how to see the game world differently. This was the difference between Gary’s and Petey’s and the elements of their characters.

The Negative

- Providing mass stereotypes cheapens stories placed in real world settings.

Summation

Bully addresses youthful violence, youthful sexuality, social interactions, and growing up moments. Where it presents violence it also presents the consequence of using your fist versus your head. *Bully* is a testament to young audiences that conflicts can be resolved peacefully, to be careful and direct with who you call a friend, and that life can turn around if you work hard towards a better end. In addition, *Bully* tells players to value their education. Rockstar could have had Jimmy simply drop out after the school expelled him; after all his parents were not coming back for him anytime soon but they chose not to. The last half of the game is about clearing Jimmy’s name and getting reenrolled into Bullworth. That is a lesson worth learning: stay in school.

Sources

1. S. Butts, " *Bully: Scholarship Edition Review*," *IGN*, Vol. , no. , pp. , October 28, 2008.[]. :<http://www.ign.com/articles/2008/10/28/bully-scholarship-edition-review>. [Accessed 10-25-13]
2. M. Reparaz, “*Bully*”, *Gameradar*, Vol. , no. , pp. , October 16, 2006.[]. :<http://www.gamesradar.com/bully-review/>. [Accessed 10-25-13]