Game Narrative Review

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Month/Year you submitted this review: December, 2021

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Game Title: Hollow Knight
Platform: PC, Nintendo Switch, PS4, Xbox One
Genre: Platformer action, 2D side-scrolling Metroidvania
Release Date: Feb 24, 2017 (PC)
Developer: Team Cherry
Publisher: Team Cherry
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: None specified in the credits

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Overview

*"Higher beings, these words are for you alone. Within our lands do not
hide your true form. Let all bask in your majesty, for only this kingdom
could produce ones such as you."*

Such was the message engraved into stone, for all players to read as they first enter the world of *Hollow Knight*. *Hollow Knight* is set in Hallownest, a kingdom of bugs – or what's left of it. Long ago, the only sentient bugs were the moths, and they worshipped a higher being known as the Radiance. However, when the Pale King, another higher being, arrived, he bestowed sentience to the rest of the bugs. The moths turned to worship the Pale King instead, as he built the civilisation of Hallownest.

But the Radiance was not content to be forgotten. When the Radiance attempted to influence the citizens of Hallownest through their dreams, it resulted in an Infection that warped the body and mind. Desperate to stop this Infection, the Pale King sired countless children and exposed them to the abyss of Void, hoping to create a Vessel that is "hollow" and immune to the Infection. The titular Hollow Knight was the successful product of this endeavour, and thus the Radiance was sealed within them. Yet the seal was unsuccessful, and the kingdom was ravaged. When the player sets foot into Hallownest once more, all that is left are ruins, infected creatures, and the few who remain for their own reasons.

Hollow Knight bears all the hallmarks of the modern Metroidvania genre. It is a 2D side-scrolling action game, where combat and platforming take up majority of the gameplay. The player is given free rein to explore the large, interconnected map of Hallownest. Last but not least, the history of Hallownest is deeply embedded into the environment of the game, and the storytelling is often done in an implicit and cryptic manner. However, *Hollow Knight* also contains a colourful cast of non-player characters (NPCs). The player is able to interact with these characters to glean more insight into

both the tragic past as well as the characters themselves – an important channel that the game uses to present the main theme of the game to the player.

Characters

The player explores Hallownest as the main character, the enigmatic Knight. They are the Hero taken to the extreme; silent, stoic, devoid of emotion – a huge contrast to the rest of the characters that are full of personality. In the beginning, they are only armed with a Nail, the bug equivalent of a sword. As the game progresses, the Knight gains artifacts that bestow them with strength and agility. Most importantly, they will come to possess the Dream Nail – a tool that allows the Knight to see into the dreams and memories of other characters.

The Knight's journey is a solitary one. They spend most of their time exploring Hallownest alone, fighting against hostile creatures. Occasionally, however, they may encounter neutral characters that they can interact with.

Hornet and Seer are two characters that act as the Knight's "dispatcher". Hornet is a princess that guards the ruins of Hallownest; she tests the Knight through combat, and guide them towards the dark secrets of the kingdom. On the other hand, the Seer guides the Knight in strengthening the Dream Nail, allowing the Knight to seal, or even defeat the Radiance. The Hollow Knight and the Radiance are the antagonists of the Knight's journey, but are only encountered in a final epic battle.

These are the main characters that are related to the Knight's journey – and here is where it gets interesting. There are a lot more characters in the world of Hallownest that the Knight can interact with, but they all are unrelated to the Knight's epic journey.

This brings us to a key idea of this essay. *Hollow Knight* presents one of its main themes not through the main plot of sealing the Radiance, but through the story of the characters that the Knight encounters.

Breakdown

Hollow Knight has a clear story purpose – that is, to present the statement of "finding and following your own purpose in life". As mentioned, Hallownest is plagued by the Infection, which starts from the mind and spreads to the body. Yet, the Knight will encounter characters that are not Infected. They all share the same characteristic: they have a strong sense of purpose, and are following that purpose. This allows them to resist the Infection.

This particular theme is interesting, because *Hollow Knight* presents the statement to the player, not through the player's character (the Knight) or their journey, but through the usually-unrelated tales of the NPCs. To give some examples, let's get acquainted with some of these characters.

Cornifer is a cartographer that the Knight will often encounter while exploring Hallownest. From interacting with him, it is evident that cartography is clearly his passion and purpose in life. He even travels to places of great peril, just to explore and complete his maps. It is no surprise that, despite spending so much time in Hallownest, he is unaffected by the Infection.

Next up, we have a more complex example. Sly used to be the Great Nailsage, the master of masters in using the Nail. He retired to be a merchant, but ended up with no business at all when Hallownest lost its inhabitants – essentially losing his purpose. The Knight eventually encounters him, delirious in his dream and on the verge of being Infected. Seeing the Knight, an adventurer that requires his merchantry, allows Sly to regain his purpose and save himself from a terrible fate.

Lastly, we can use the Hollow Knight and Pale King as "negative" examples. The Hollow Knight was meant to be hollow, devoid of emotion, so that he can be a Vessel to contain the Radiance; similarly, the Pale King had to be a stoic ruler, sacrificing his child to save his kingdom. However, both of them lost sight of their purpose, as they began to bond as parent and child. The Hollow Knight was hollow no more, allowing the Infection to take hold of him and weaken the seal.

Strongest Interactive Element

In her paper titled "*Interactive Narrative, Plot Types, and Interpersonal Relations*", Marie-Laure Ryan stated that there are three types of plot types in interactive narratives: epic, dramatic and epistemic. The Knight's journey as the saviour of Hallownest is clearly an epic plot – he travels alone, goes through adversity to become stronger, and ultimately achieves a legendary feat. The characters that participate in this journey either serve as an obstacle, or an opportunity to grow. Nothing more, nothing less.

How then, can *Hollow Knight* convey its theme in a way that can reach players emotionally? The solution lies in the NPCs, who are more akin to characters in their own dramatic plot. Using Greg M. Smith's dissection of character identification, let us analyze how the game invites the player to identify with these characters instead of the main character.

Hollow Knight is primarily an action game. Therefore, the player spends most of their gameplay following the Knight's perspective. Although this is supposed to the Knight the "most" spatially aligned, the Knight has no independent personality and will. Due to this hollowness, the Knight feels less like a identifiable character and more like an extension of the player's spectator seat.

This lack of personality in the Knight also plays a huge role when interacting with NPCs. When talking to NPCs, the Knight does not respond at all, making it a monologue of the other character. This essentially makes the player spatially attached to the NPC instead of the Knight, allowing the player to align with the NPC during that moment.

Hollow Knight also takes care to make sure NPCs feel like actual living characters instead of text boxes. Firstly, for the first few times you interact with an NPC, they will not repeat their lines, and will instead have new and interesting things to talk about. Secondly, the NPCs are essentially in their own journey to fulfil their purpose, independent from the Knight. When the Knight encounters them by "chance", the player will then learn about the experiences of the NPC so far, and how they have grown from these experiences. This allows the player to make or change their moral judgement towards the NPC. Later on, the Knight can even use the Dream Nail on the NPCs to hear their inner thoughts. This provides subjective access to the NPC's thought process, allowing the player to further align and consider their moral allegiance with the NPC.

Using this two-step process of alignment and allegiance, *Hollow Knight* successfully invites the player to identify with the NPCs, and present the main theme of the game.

Weakest Interactive Element

Although the writing of *Hollow Knight* does a great job of inviting the player to identify with its characters, the game design has elements that sometimes hinder this process of invitation.

Firstly, being a Metroidvania, the player often has more than one way of exploring the world of *Hollow Knight*. Therefore, the player could potentially miss an encounter with an NPC. This often leads to the player missing the rest of the character's journey, preventing the player from properly identifying with said character. For example, the character Zote has a fairly long journey, and you will encounter him in many situations – that is, if you saved him in a specific point in time. Otherwise, Zote dies, and you never see him again.

Hollow Knight also contains difficult sections of combat and platforming. The player could become frustrated and give up, potentially missing key encounters with certain NPCs. One prime example is the infamous "Path of Pain". A crucial part of the Hollow Knight and the Pale King's story is locked behind this section. However, it is a long and ardous platforming section, making it virtually impossible for less-skilled players to complete.

Highlight

Among the cast of characters in *Hollow Knight*, there are two characters who share the same statement: what purpose is left when you have lost your purpose in life? The parallel journey and resolution of these characters is especially thought-provoking and emotionally impactful.

Early into the game, the Knight encounters a bug named Cloth. Initially, she tells the Knight that she seeks to fight the hostile inhabitants in Hallownest to prove her strength. However, subsequent encounters with her reveals that she is too cowardly to actually fight anything. Most importantly, when the Knight peeks into her thoughts using the Dream Nail, the player will realize that she has lost her purpose when her lover has died – now, her purpose is simply to die in an epic battle, and "reunite" with her lover. Eventually, Cloth musters her courage and joins the Knight in a fight against a powerful enemy, sacrificing herself in the end. By using the Dream Nail to talk to her spirit one last time, she tells the Knight that she is satisfied with her death.

On the other side of the same coin, we have the Nailsmith, whose purpose is to craft the Pure Nail. When he finally crafts his magnum opus, he will request the Knight to kill him with the Nail, because his purpose in life has been fulfilled. If the Knight does not do so, the Nailsmith eventually finds a new purpose in making art and figurines with a newfound companion.

Unlike the Nailsmith, who goes on to live for himself and rediscovering his purpose, Cloth seeks to end her life when she lost her lover. The game invites the player to identify with either of them, especially by aligning the player with them during their pivotal moments (the Nailsmith's request for death, and Cloth's sacrifice). This provokes the player to evaluate the choices of both of the characters, and consider their own moral principles, making it an impactful statement.

Critical Reception

Hollow Knight has a score of 87/100 on Metacritic, based on 27 critical reviews. Sean Martin from Hooked Gamers commented that although interacting with many of the characters are optional to the main plot, he still finds it enjoyable to interact with their distinct personalities.

On the other hand, Tom Marks from IGN focuses more on the epistemic elements of the narrative, about how the player slowly uncovers the history of Hallownest through the rich environment and cast of characters. He also notes that the challenging nature of the game can feel daunting to the player, perhaps even turning them away from the game.

These two critical receptions show that *Hollow Knight* has done well with its storytelling by using epistemic and dramatic plot elements alongside the main epic plot, but also highlights how the difficulty of the game could hinder the storytelling.

Lessons in Interactive Fiction

From *Hollow Knight*, we can derive several useful lessons. The tools that film typically uses to invite viewers to identify with characters can by similarly applied in video games. Spatial alignment, subjective access and the spectator perspective are all tools that are already part of the video game medium. With these tools, we can help characters gain allegiance from the player and invite them to identify with these characters. This results in a more interactive and emotionally impactful experience.

In addition, we also learn that an action game is not limited to the epic plot type. Although the epic plot type is most suited to action games and their protagonists, game writers and designers should not restrict the writing to this plot type. Instead, they can weave in elements of epistemic and dramatic plot types into the game to drive home a certain statement, and increase the interactivity of the narrative. *Hollow Knight* may not be the first of its kind, but it is certainly a successful example.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one of the main themes of *Hollow Knight* is to find and follow your purpose in life. The game conveys this theme in an interactive manner, by inviting the player to identify with its various non-player characters other than the main character, each facing their own quandary. This shows us that the tools used by film to form an interactive experience – character identification – can also be applied successfully in epic, action games.

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