

Game Narrative Review

=====

Your name: Amari O'Connor

Your school: Quinnipiac University

Your email: amarij.oconnor@gmail.com

Month/Year you submitted this review: December 2022

=====

Game Title: *The Wolf Among Us*

Platform: PlayStation 4, Android, Xbox One, PlayStation 3, macOS, iOS, Microsoft Windows, Xbox 360, PlayStation Vita

Genre: Graphic Adventure game, Action game, Interactive film, Casual game, Adventure

Release Date: October 11, 2013

Developer: Telltale Games

Publisher: Telltale Games

Game Writers: Pierre Shorette (Ep 1), Dave Grossman (Ep 2 - Lead), Adam Hines (Ep 2, Ep 3 - Lead, Ep 5), Dan Martin (Ep 4 - Lead), Nicole Martinez (Ep 2, Ep 3, Ep 5)

Overview

After the fables were chased out of the “Homelands,” they created a new place in the human or “mundane” world called Fabletown. This sector of homes and businesses is now located in modern-day Manhattan, and as the sheriff, the player character, Bigby Wolf (aka the Big Bad Wolf) is tasked with keeping them all safe. Soon, however, the role of sheriff turns to detective, as a series of gruesome murders are uncovered within the fable community. When relations between certain fables start to fall apart, and the corruption of Fabletown starts to become more apparent, it becomes clear that the only person willing and able to solve the mystery is none other than Bigby Wolf. However, as the case turns into something larger than anyone expected, Bigby struggles to choose what the rights and wrongs of his community actually are, and whether the justice brought to this crime will actually keep his community the safest.

The Wolf Among Us is an adventure game that is based on some of the characters and the world of Bill Willingham’s comic series, *Fables*. However, keeping itself separate from the comic series, the game takes place in 1986, which means that it is a prequel that takes place about 20 years prior to the comic series. Although many would think that a detective story surrounding fairytale and folklore characters would have an optimistic spin, *The Wolf Among Us* excels in being a dark, gritty detective story. On the surface, it’s a fun and intriguing take on the modern lifestyle and relationships of Fabletown’s characters. However, when examined more closely, the game’s story is a dark and thrilling investigation of the destruction of Fabletown through murder, underground crime rings,

and general political failure. Beyond this, it also offers some intense commentary on real societal issues that are present in and amongst all of the Fabletown residents.

For the purpose of this analysis staying as concise as possible, I will be focusing heavily on the last episode of the series (Episode 5), with a bit of in-depth analysis of the introduction to the game. Other than that, I will provide only the necessary narrative context for understanding the game's overall plot.

Characters

- **Bigby Wolf** – Formerly known as the Big Bad Wolf, child of the Winter Wolf (mother) and the North Wind (father), Bigby is the protagonist and player character of *The Wolf Among Us*. He acts as Fabletown's sheriff and is tasked with protecting the Fables from the Mundies (non-magical humans/creatures from the "Mundane World" Fabletown exists in) and each other. Although many of the player's choices affect Bigby's reputation and personality in-game, he is generally a morally gray individual. He is shown to be competent, pragmatic, fairly stoic, and usually tries to be even-tempered until he's pushed too hard. The game actively establishes towards the beginning that even though Bigby was known as a terrorizing entity back in the Homelands, he's been attempting to put those days behind him in the New/Mundane World. Now that he's been appointed sheriff, he makes an effort to always remain in his human form (an ability gained through a lycanthropy-stained knife when he traveled to the New World). Alternatively, he has a partial werewolf form, a full werewolf form, and a "true" form that stands as an enormous, 8-foot tall wolf with a "huff and puff" ability inherited from his father. Despite his best efforts to control his instincts and show that he has truly changed, the citizens of Fabletown are slow to trust him, if at all.
- **Snow White** – Snow White is one of the main non-player characters in *The Wolf Among Us*. Although she used to be a princess in the Homelands—amongst other roles in many other versions of her tales—she now serves as Assistant to the Deputy Mayor of Fabletown. While Ichabod Crane serves as the official Deputy Mayor, it is clear that he's more of a figurehead, as Snow is tasked with taking on most of his workload. Before taking her position in the Fabletown government, Snow found out that her husband, Prince Charming, had cheated on her with her estranged sister, Rose Red. Snow White may seem insensitive and a bit cold at first glance, but her distant demeanor comes from the mistreatment and abuse she faced before coming to the New World. Throughout the game, she shows that she cares greatly for her fellow fables and always tries to do what's best for them. Snow White is outspoken and kind, and constantly encourages Bigby to try to do what's right and move away from his past violent tendencies.

- **Faith** – Faith, also known as Donkeyskin, is a short-lived NPC in *The Wolf Among Us*. Former princess, now prostitute, in present-day Fabletown, the New/Mundane World was not as kind to her as it should have been. Her happy marriage disintegrated under the pressures of poverty, and she was forced to turn to less-than-savory means to make ends meet. Despite her jadedness, when Faith is saved by Bigby Wolf in the introductory scene of the game, she sees past his stoic facade and tells him he isn't as bad as everyone says he is. After the evening of the intro scene, she becomes the first victim in the serial killings and her head shows up on the steps of the Woodlands apartment building later the same night.
- **Nerissa** – Formerly known as The Little Mermaid, Nerissa is a main character and stripper at the Pudding 'N Pie. She has very little left from the Homelands, especially since her original story has no happy ending, but she found comfort amongst her friends/fellow dancers at the club. Nerissa makes her first appearance in Episode 2 of the game and remains a consistent aid in the murder investigation. Faith and Lily being her friends, she is distraught by their deaths and passionate about getting them some kind of justice. Nerissa is quiet, but honest about her opinions, and though she struggles to find her voice throughout the story, by the end of the game she has become more outspoken. She has confidence in Bigby throughout the entire investigation, and at the end of Episode 5, is the one to reveal that the Crooked Man ordered the hits on her friends. In the epilogue of the game, she tells Bigby that he isn't as bad as everyone says he is.
- **The Crooked Man** – A main character and antagonist of the game, The Crooked Man is the lord of the criminal underground of Fabletown. He is the fable from the English nursery rhyme/poem "There Was a Crooked Man." After leaving the Homelands, The Crooked Man slowly built himself into one of the most powerful Fables in the city. He is by far one of the most cunning, persuasive, and ruthless Fables met in the game and is the orchestrator responsible for ordering the two investigated murders (though he insists he did no such thing). The Crooked Man's criminal web is immense, it is implied that almost every Fable in the city has gone to or through him for something at least once. According to the Book of Fables in-game, he also killed his wife and children.
- **Bloody Mary** – Bloody Mary, the fable of the famous "Bloody Mary" folklore, is a fairly main character and secondary antagonist first seen in Episode 3 of the game. She is a ruthless, violent, and powerful criminal who works for the Crooked Man. Even within the fable community, Bloody Mary's story is a mystery to even those most acquainted with her. Beyond her name, she is well-known for her resistance to magic, ability to use reflective surfaces as portals, and passion for violence. Her true form is that of her human body, bloodied, with endless amounts of glass

shards coming out of her. When in this form, she is also able to clone herself. Although she is overly loyal and protective of her boss, the Crooked Man, she doesn't appear to have much, if any, regard for the rest of her colleagues.

- **Ichabod Crane** – Ichabod Crane is an active antagonist throughout the game. Based on the protagonist of *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, Ichabod now serves as the cowardly Deputy Mayor of Fabletown. Although he is supposed to be a colleague in the Business Office, he is depicted as arrogant and greedy and is known to be purposefully neglectful of his mayoral duties to Fabletown. However, he eventually becomes a suspect in the serial killings before being proven innocent. Despite his innocence in the killings, it is revealed that he's been corrupt and under the Crooked Man's thumb for some time. He is arguably the one responsible for Fabletown's recent downward spiral.
 - **Georgie Porgie** – Georgie Porgie, characterized by the popular nursery rhyme of the same name, is one of the antagonists in *The Wolf Among Us*. He's a pimp and the owner of Fabletown's strip club, the Pudding 'N Pie. With Vivian as his business partner, he employs several girls in town as strippers and prostitutes. Unpopular for the many fees, debts, and mistreatment accrued by those who work for him, he's known for being misogynistic, selfish, provocative, and immature. However, although he is a rather abusive control freak, it's discovered that he is actually one of the Crooked Man's lackeys. It is also revealed that he is the direct killer of Faith and Lily, though his boss made the verbal call to do so. His sadistic nature is shown through his shameless tone toward his actions (including the murders), but he is shown to have genuinely cared for his partner in crime (Vivian) upon her death.
 - **Vivian** – Vivian is a minor NPC in *The Wolf Among Us*, known for being the playful and flirtatious hostess at the Puddin N' Pie strip club. She was previously known as the first "Girl with the Ribbon," a rather grim tale about a woman with a ribbon permanently tied around her neck. She cannot speak of the curse directly, nor can she remove it. If the ribbon is removed, her head is severed, killing her. When she left the Homelands, she was determined to find a fresh start, resentful of anyone who thought they could control her. Vivian and Georgie [see above] took a liking to each other, and she decided to work at the Pudding N' Pie as a stripper and host. It is later revealed that she played a role in "ensuring customer satisfaction" and discretion by duplicating and alternating her ribbon's spell. Removing her ribbon is the only way to break the curse on the other ribbon-wearers. She commits suicide in Episode 5 of the game by pulling her own ribbon off.
-

Breakdown

Plot Structure

The Wolf Among Us is structured similarly to most graphic adventure Telltale games, episodically with a branch and bottleneck style storyline. Over the course of its creation, *The Wolf Among Us* had five episodes intermittently released from October 2013 to July 2014. Each episode resembled a different chapter of the story and was approximately 1-2 hours of gameplay. The episodic nature added a lot to the game's community as it encouraged theory-building and an appreciation for the finer details of the game. With that said, unlike some other styles of episodic games, *The Wolf Among Us* was fully planned and storyboarded before its creation and release. As a result, though there were changes to accommodate minor concerns and feedback, the narrative never strayed much (if at all) from the original path.

The Wolf Among Us uses the "branch and bottleneck" technique of interactive storytelling to assure a vivid, immersive, and unique experience each time you play the game. Using this technique, the game branches off into many different narrative paths, but regularly rejoins at unchanging key events. Using this style of branching, it is also fairly common for choice to be order-specific, rather than "one or the other." For example, with many of the setting-based investigation decisions in *The Wolf Among Us*, the player is required to go to all of them before the plot moves forward. The choice in the first episode is not, "which will you investigate: Prince Lawrence's Apartment or Toad's Apartment?" Instead, it is the question of "which will you investigate *first*?" Investigation of both locations is necessary to get the information needed to move forward, but the player's decision of order will drastically alter what is found in at least one of the chosen locations. This can even determine whether or not a character at one of the locations survives and is present for the rest of the game.

A common misconception of the game, as well as many others within the same genre, is that your choices do not affect the story in any major way. While in many instances of interactive media, there is never a drastic change in the story elements, *The Wolf Among Us* has a wide variety of effects on the storyline dependent on what the player chooses. This confusion comes from a lack of understanding of the nuances of narrative design. Many consumers of media confuse or conflate the terms plot and story. This is something I have studied thoroughly as a playwright and director, as they have very distinct differences that are crucial to interactive storytelling. The story, in essence, is what exactly is happening in your game. It's the who, what, and where of the concept (the events occurring), as opposed to the how, when, and why of it (Miyamoto 2022). The latter three are defined as the plot, which is essentially the order of the story's events. The plot is typically what interactive narrative-based games allow you to control, and that is exactly how *The Wolf Among Us* uses its tools with the story structure above. By changing the order of the plot points, you change the hows, whens, and whys of certain actions, altering

the story even if the overall objectives and ending of the game stay the same. *The Wolf Among Us* does this rather proficiently within its chosen themes and storyline.

Intro Scene Breakdown

The game begins with a short written explanation of the setting/world, and then an atmospheric cutscene. There are some very well-animated shots of the city, Bigby riding in a cab, radio in the background with a weather forecast going, and a semblance of other city sounds. As he gets out of the cab and enters the building he was headed to, the gameplay begins. You're introduced to Toad, who seems to have called you, distressed and annoyed by the racket being caused by the tenant upstairs. After a short conversation about Toad's lack of glamour (illegal in Fabletown), the consequences of being without it, and how expensive it is, Bigby heads upstairs to deal with the issue at hand. Upstairs, he finds the Woodsman assaulting an unknown Fable who works at the Pudding 'N Pie (Faith, though unknown to Bigby until Episode One). Later, after some antagonization and a huge fight scene, she reveals that they were fighting because he was refusing to pay her. Other than that, Bigby is unable to get much information out of her, as she keeps repeating the phrase "My lips are sealed," along with other vague and avoidant responses. Despite being fairly callous to him, after they speak a bit more and hit it off, she leans onto his shoulder and whispers, "You're not as bad as everyone says you are," before walking off.

This game introduction scene is one of the best narrative introduction scenes I have seen in this style of game genre. Although there are some minor issues with technical elements and choice details, narratively it's very successful. It not only sets the player up with an understanding of the world, but it introduces them to some of the early, consistent themes of the game, as well as recurring characters and later suspects/victims. Immediately, the player is brought into this modernized noir of fairytale characters. It's established that while they are Fable characters, they seem to be dealing with very prominent real-life issues and personal conflicts: scrounging for money and being worried about the costs of poverty while protecting a family, the grittiness of sex work when its workers are unseen/heard by the government. Beyond this, it also establishes the connection already present between all of the characters. Lines such as, "We all sort of knew each other at one point or another...but things change, I guess..." (Faith, Ep. 1), set up both the past of all these fable/folklore characters being of the same fantasy world, while also bringing the player back to the reality of that no longer being the case. There is also a narrative smoothness to the integration of every gameplay action the character is taught. Nothing is too forced, and for the most part, the player can still choose how, when, why, and if they want to do things.

Episodes 1-4 Summary (for Episode 5 Context)

The high point of Episode 1 does not last long. The player gets the chance to interact briefly with Bigby's roommate, Colin (one of the three little pigs), where more

class disparity is exposed. It's revealed that Colin keeps sneaking off The Farm (a town for unglamoured non-human Fables), and though he wants to stay in Fabletown, he simply cannot afford glamour. Despite knowing Colin means no harm, Bigby is forced to choose whether or not he's going to send Colin back. After this conversation, the real mystery of the game begins. When Snow White frantically knocks on Bigby's door and drags him downstairs, he is shocked to find the decapitated head of the girl he met earlier at Toad's lying on the steps of the apartment building. Using the town's archives, she is revealed to be the princess known as Faith (or "Donkeyskin Girl"). This sparks the rest of the mood for Episode One as a dark murder mystery amongst peers and corruption. In this episode, the player explores its first suspect, Faith's husband, Prince Lawrence, as well as the shady investigators, Tweedle Dee and Dum, who seem to be snooping around every crime scene Bigby heads to. You're introduced to Fables that frequent the Trip Trap bar (Grendel and Holly), and finally, the player is faced with a choice of arresting Tweedle Dee or the Woodsman. The episode ends on a fantastic cliffhanger: as Bigby approaches the Woodlands with his arrestee, he finds the building surrounded by Mundy (mundane) police, he approaches to find out what the fuss is about and discovers another head... Snow White's.

At this point in the game, Snow has been established as a likable main character that Bigby grows closer to throughout the first episode. Finding her dead is one of the most shocking moments in the game and urges you to keep playing. However, in Episode 2, we soon find out that she isn't dead. Before this discovery, Bigby gets arrested by the Mundy police, and then subsequently saved by Crane. The true victim of the second murder was a troll named Lily, who was simply glamoured to look like Snow White. Lily is found out to be Holly's sister and another worker at the Pudding 'N Pie. The player goes to question Georgie at the club and meets Vivian and Nerissa, both employed by Georgie as a hostess/stripper and stripper/prostitute respectively. Georgie claims innocence and Nerissa, though her lips are sealed, begins to help the player throughout the rest of the game.

By Episode 3, Bigby finds evidence that Crane was present at the scene of Lily's murder and pins him as a possible culprit. Crane sees this through the magic mirror, shatters it, and disappears. This episode introduces the player to several new characters as Bigby and Snow work to track down Crane. When they catch him, Snow realizes he is not the killer, just a very creepy man obsessed with her, but they decide to apprehend him anyway. On their way out, they are stopped by the Crooked Man and some of his lackeys. The player meets Bloody Mary, the strongest and most cruel of the crooked crew. Despite using his werewolf form, Mary brutalizes Bigby and they take Crane with them.

Episode 4 consists of unraveling the layers of the Crooked Man's criminal exploits. It reveals even more of the classism within the society and how deep the criminal underground goes because of it. Nerissa appears at Bigby's office, attempting to aid as best as she can with the investigation, and Bigby realizes it's the ribbons that have been

restricting the Pudding 'N Pie girls from talking. The player continues the investigation at the Cut Above butcher shop and a pawn shop owned by the Jersey Devil called the Lucky Pawn (order dependent on player choice). Finally, at the end of the episode, they find the current location of the door to the Cooked Man's Lair, which is approximately where we begin Episode 5.

Episode 5 Breakdown

Episode five is an extensive episode that is both narrative and player-choice-heavy. This makes it one of the more memorable and impactful episodes of the game. It begins with Bigby entering the Crooked Man's meeting room—where the player sees the Jersey Devil, Georgie Porgie, Vivian, Tweedledee, Tweedledum (determinant of a prior choice), and Bloody Mary—and being invited to join the discussion being had. Regardless of the player's choices, it is eventually revealed by the Crooked Man that Georgie killed Faith and Lily. Georgie is outraged that he was sold out and tells Bigby that the Crooked Man ordered him to commit the murders. The player is given the choice of arresting Georgie or the Crooked Man, and with either choice, chaos breaks out within the room. The only two to escape the fight are the Crooked Man with Bloody Mary, and Vivian with a fatally stabbed Georgie. First, the player heads to the Pudding 'N Pie, where he finds Vivian and Georgie (who is almost dead). Georgie confesses to killing them, but on orders of the Crooked Man, and refuses to show remorse. He tells Bigby where the Crooked Man was headed and also shares that Vivian is the original Girl With The Ribbon, which means all of the magic keeping the girls from talking is tied to her curse. Vivian expresses deep regret and remorse for being indirectly responsible for the death of her friends, and before anything can be done, she ends up killing herself by pulling her ribbon off. The player chooses whether or not to leave Georgie bleeding out or to put him out of his misery.

With nothing more to be done, Bigby heads to the old foundry where Bloody Mary and the Crooked Man are hiding. Bloody Mary and Bigby Wolf engage in an intense fight. Mary pulls out her true form, determined to kill Bigby and protect the Crooked Man. At first, Bigby is overpowered by Mary's relentless attacks. However, Bigby soon also transforms, using his "huff and puff" ability to blow Mary's replicas away and crushing Bloody Mary into lifeless shards of glass between his jaws. Bigby then corners the Crooked Man, who tells Bigby he wants a fair trial at the Woodlands. The player can choose to kill or arrest him and brings him (dead or alive) to the group of Fables gathered under the Woodlands. Dependent on player choice, certain characters are more appalled, grateful, or shocked than others. No matter the option, Snow and Bigby are forced to defend themselves against the unrest of the Fable community after this case. Determined by previous actions and behavior chosen by the player, some citizens will be more understanding than others. Although Bigby attempts to reason with them and recounts the confessions of Vivian and Georgie, it is not until Nerissa—able to speak freely with the

curse finally broken—gives her account of the Crooked Man's guilt that the remaining Fables are calmed down.

The epilogue shows Snow serving as the new Deputy Mayor, and Bigby seeing the Fables [Toad and TJ, Colin (determinant)] being sent off to The Farm. Depending on the player's choice, they may also see the Crooked Man imprisoned. A major portion of the epilogue, however, is a conversation with Nerissa. At the end of this conversation, she comments on Bigby's character, saying the same phrase as Faith in Episode 1, "You're not as bad as everyone says you are," and walks off around the corner (insinuating that she will not be coming back to Fabletown). At this moment, Bigby has a flashback to several different plot points in the game, and he has a realization. The last choice of the game is between going after her or letting her go, and then there's a blackout.

Episode 5 is so intense and narratively packed because it is the culmination of every major plot point in the game thus far. It opens suspensefully, making the player unsure of the environment they're entering (The Crooked Man's Lair), catches the player off-guard with the characters present, and then gives them the satisfaction of solving the crime within the first few minutes of the gameplay. This makes the final episode unique because instead of the focus being fully investigational, the player is given the opportunity to enjoy the extra reveals of plot points as they tie up loose ends. It gives the full stage to the crisis moment, the climax, and the denouement without rushing them through it. Every choice leads up to it and is properly accounted for in this episode. The branch and bottleneck technique that *The Wolf Among Us* excels in relies on tracking the choices of the player throughout. Although this is always done by Telltale throughout its episodic releases, Episode 5 of this series handles this particularly well. The trial scene, for example, has every character present (in whatever state your choices led them to) and ready to fight for or against you based on what was done to/for them in-game. Even a minor choice to the player, of being merciful or ruthless in their investigation, is something that could be brought up in the trial. Did the player burn Aunty Greenleaf's (a witch from Episode 3) tree, or protect it? Were remorse and empathy shown to the Fables, or do they harbor resentment towards you for ill-treatment? Seeing these effects play out at the end of the game is rewarding to the player; good or bad it provides a sense of satisfaction. There are also some of the most emotional moments and wild reveals in this episode. The scene with Vivian and Georgie at the Pudding 'N Pie, for instance, is one of the most well-written moments of the game. If the player's choices allow them to see the whole scene play out, it's a staple moment in really feeling the downfall of Fabletown.

Themes

The Wolf Among Us deals with many harsh and gritty themes that connect to and reflect life in the world outside of video games. While the player gets to choose exactly how Bigby deals with most of the conflicts, regardless of the decisions made, they are forced to confront the heavier core meanings the investigation brings to light. This can

sometimes be uncomfortable for the players, but Telltale's chosen themes make the game all the more unique and powerful. However, due to the sheer mass of these undertones and overarching concepts, it can be overwhelming to unpack them all without breaking them down. Three of the major themes throughout the game's storyline are classism and class disparity (character vs society), the complex nature of justice (character vs society and self), and Bigby's internal moral conflict (character vs self). The game also deals with some minor themes, such as misogyny and exploitation.

As stated above, one of the major themes *The Wolf Among Us* deals with is class disparity, classism, and the political failings around such issues. This is something present throughout the game and amongst many of its characters. At first, it seems like a simple class-split present in normal city life, but as the player progresses, it becomes more and more apparent how detrimental classism is in the storyline. The price of poverty is a specifically recurrent part of this theme. The game introduces the players to the most impoverished part of Fabletown—where the player meets Toad, Faith, and Woody—and later in the series, this is juxtaposed by our wealthiest characters, Crane and Bluebeard for instance. It is even exposed that some of the Fables living in the Woodlands (the luxury apartments of Fabletown), cannot actually afford their lifestyle, yet feel the need to keep up appearances. Grendel and Holly at the Trip Trap bar also reveal that there is clear favoritism in what gets taken care of first in the Business Office. Even things like missing person reports get ignored if a Fable is not of high enough status to make a difference in the community. The expensive price of poverty comes into play with many of the poor, non-human appearing Fables. If they cannot afford glamour (an expensive commodity) they are kicked out of the city. However, it is shown throughout the game that there are no financial supports in place to help them achieve this, resulting in an underground market for the things they need (giving root to the criminal underworld and the success of the Crooked Man).

The Introduction to Episode One – Bigby confronts Toad about being out of glamour:

BIGBY: If you can't afford to look human, you're going to The Farm. It's as simple as that.

TOAD: You can't send me up to live with those animals...

[...]

BIGBY: Go see a witch. Get a glamour.

TOAD: Bigby, they're bleedin' me dry, mate. The quality of the spell goes down, but the rates keep climbing up. Do you have any idea how much it costs to have an entire family in glamour?

The complex nature of justice and the internal moral conflict of Bigby Wolf throughout the game are two themes that often overlap in the gameplay. Although the player is asked or trusted to "do the right thing" many times throughout the game, by

various characters, there is never an answer as to what the right thing is. Bigby struggles with what “justice” actually means for his community. He knows what angers him and what has hurt people (literally and figuratively), but those are the only things he’s fully able to rely on. Even when people he trusts, like Snow White, tell him what the right thing to do is, there can be clear bias in her judgment, which the player has to decide on in the moment. In making these decisions, the player watches Bigby struggle as to whether he should lean into his more aggressive, wolf-like instincts, or stay on the straight and narrow now that he’s in the New World.

Artistic Direction and Gameplay

In general, *The Wolf Among Us* does a great job of keeping the player immersed throughout the gameplay. The mood and atmosphere set by the art match the narrative elements exceedingly well, and the game’s sound design is highly effective in terms of bringing the audience into the world. Although the graphics and animation are not the most advanced, its art style is distinct and works with all of the artistic elements (sound and writing) to heighten world-building. The game also does an extraordinary job of leaning into its neon color palette, with harsh shadowing, to create a modern film noir atmosphere. Its gameplay is fun, albeit quite simple in design. However, because of this simple design, the game’s mechanics do not keep the player from interpreting and properly engaging with the storyline. The gameplay elements are not invasive or overused, which makes the playability accessible to even those who are not frequent game players.

Strongest Element

The strongest element of *The Wolf Among Us*—across all of its episodes—is the fantastically characterized world-building of the narrative and the player-feedback UI that comes with it. Not necessarily the world-building in terms of environment (though that is arguably strong as well), but the extensive connections between different characters and their respective fables/stories. The world of *The Wolf Among Us* is initially introduced in the prologue with a simple few sentences:

Once upon a time in New York City, there lived a community of fairy tale characters known as Fabletown. The Fables who live there arrived hundreds of years ago, after they were exiled from their Homelands.

-

Through the use of a magic spell called Glamour, they have protected their secret community from the mundane world.

-

Sheriff Bigby Wolf protects them from each other.

The setting is immediately established, as is the existence of magic, Fable characters, and Bigby’s role as sheriff. However, the true world-building of the game begins as the

player-character interaction does. All of the Fables have a distinct way of interacting with one another, clearly influenced by the stories that gave them life. The dynamic between the Woodsman (Woody) and the Big Bad Wolf (Bigby), as it was in their fables, is always present in their interactions. The personality traits of the Fables are always reminiscent of their lore and what they have lived through. This is reinforced by a unique and well-implemented achievement/collectible UI element, The Book of Fables. Not only is this referenced as being a tool usable by the characters in-game, but as the player meets new Fables, they are entered into the book with information on their person and snippets of their story from the Homelands. It alludes to whether or not they had a “happily ever after” and what they are now in search of in the “New World.” This book updates along with player choices, and object reveals. It also showcases the development of Bigby’s character throughout the game. Beyond The Book of Fables, there is always an element of familiarity among the Fables, even if they have not met in hundreds of years. It’s implied that this is due to their connected activity in the Homelands. Even the insults characters use, or justification for their actions, are connected back to their roots as a Fable.

Some intriguing character quotes showcasing interconnected Fable knowledge and dynamics are:

“Oh *her*. That explains the sting. I'd rather not feel the pain she brings. So, let's not do that again, okay?” — **The Magic Mirror admitting his fear/disdain for Bloody Mary, Ep. 4**

- Although they aren’t from the same story at all, Bloody Mary’s effect on reflective surfaces and history with mirrors is unpleasant for The Magic Mirror.

“Didn't your mother ever teach you manners? Or was she too busy fucking whatever breeze drifted through town?” — **Bloody Mary insulting Bigby Wolf, Ep. 5**

- Referring to Bigby’s parents, Bloody Mary is well aware of his family’s story and lineage. She chooses to incorporate that into her jabs as they fight.

Unsuccessful Element

One of the serious flaws in the narrative of *The Wolf Among Us* is its skewed portrayal of sex work. Although I think the intent of the plotline regarding this was not problematic, its execution is something that could have used a bit more support to be completely successful. During my research on the game, I found that many people were interpreting the message of the game’s sex work portrayal to be that sex work is dangerous, that all the workers in it are forced to be, and that it is generally not legitimate. This caught me off guard because that had not been my own experience interpreting the game. The portrayal of competent sex workers (who are not one-dimensional) in games can have a very positive effect on our society. Many condemn “...the depiction of sex

workers in games because they see sex worker characters as fundamentally objectified” (Ruberg 2018), which is not a helpful critique of game narratives. However, as I broke down the story in my analysis, I realized why this specific portrayal was unsuccessful.

A primary thematic intention of *The Wolf Among Us* was to comment on the issue of class and the social hierarchy of society. The aim of showing Nerissa, Faith, and Lily as so unhappy in their jobs as strippers and sex workers was to emphasize the struggles of Fables who were of lower class and status than those above. It wasn’t that the type of work they were doing was ruining their lives, but rather, the lack of support they had from Fabletown’s government led to their work getting exploited by Georgie and the Crooked Man. The ribbons keeping them from speaking about their work, making them unable to leave, symbolized more of their inability to get out of the cycle of poverty (because of the Crooked Man, Georgie, etc.), not their supposed disdain for sex work. Despite Telltale trying to implement several different aspects of their characters and lives to show this, I think the core meaning behind this plotline fell flat for a couple of specific reasons.

At first glance, the ribbons and setup of the Pudding ‘N Pie seem like they could only have been created for exploitation. However, it is revealed by Vivian in the last scene that when the curse was placed on her friends, she (and even Georgie) intended for it to just be a joking sales pitch: a guarantee of the girls’ “discretion” about their jobs and who sought out their services. Georgie’s greed and implementation of fees to cause debt, along with the Crooked Man’s control over the Pudding ‘N Pie, is what actually makes the girls miserable. Even though these facts are revealed to the player by the end of the game, this scene is not able to correct the other smaller opinions and actions that shed a negative light on the work, as opposed to the people running it. Snow’s reaction to finding out Faith was a sex worker, for example, is a reaction that easily sticks with the player versus any reactions from the more positive side of the spectrum. There are a few mentions of Georgie’s sleaziness (specifically by Holly and Lawrence). However, the lines written about it were not always direct enough to lead the player to him being the specific problem with the Pudding ‘N Pie (i.e. Lawrence’s quote, “Fuckin’ Georgie...”). Holly, after finding out about her sister’s (Lily’s) death, says “ Georgie, with all his fuckin’ ‘fees,’ it’s a crock of shit. It’s how they kept her under their thumb, really...” (Holly Ep. 2). This is a very telling quote, but with no direct juxtaposition of the girls enjoying other things about their jobs at the Pudding ‘N Pie, it can still be easily misinterpreted. There is physical evidence of them enjoying the company of working with their friends, as well as mentions of it within the Book of Fables, but nothing spoken outright by the women or anyone else in-game that tells the player they chose this with positive intention/results. This means that even after the last scene at the Pudding ‘N Pie, the blame could easily be misplaced.

The last thing that was necessary, to avoid the misinterpretations made about *The Wolf Among Us* bashing sex workers, was more emphasis on the status and class divide in Fabletown. There is clear evidence of unfair rules and oppression (mostly perpetuated by Crane’s negligence) around the Fables of the lower class, specifically the ones who need to

afford full-time glamour. The price of said glamour, lack of support or care from their town's government, along with pre-existing money problems is shown to make people turn to the Crooked Man for any semblance of help. However, the game does not showcase enough specific examples of why many people, even those who didn't need to worry about glamour, needed to go to the Crooked Man for resources. Emphasizing the need for other resources the Crooked Man provided would have taken less pressure off of the "sex work is bad" narrative and placed it more on the issues of classism in the Fable community.

The inclusion of sex workers in the narrative of *The Wolf Among Us* is not the issue with their plot. It is how the writers presented the work that skews their intent. There is a distinct difference between displaying a wanted job in a toxic work environment versus depicting a forced or devalued job. An academic journal on sex workers in games gives a similar critique about why the industry's current representation is harmful. Ultimately, it's "...not the inclusion of women characters as sex workers per se, but rather the ways in which these games systematically strip these characters' work of its value" (Ruberg 2018). The inclusion of sex work in games can be a positive influence if done correctly. It is the lack of respect placed on the work that they do, as well as the constant portrayal of sex work not being a legitimate way the characters choose to work, that makes the portrayal in *The Wolf Among Us* negative.

Highlight

For me, the absolute best moment of *The Wolf Among Us* was its epilogue scene, specifically the end of it. There is truly no description that would do it more justice than the feeling you get when you play (or watch) it for the first time. However, it is a generally shocking moment of realization for a possible theory that never gets resolved.

After the player sees most of the loose strings of the narrative wrapped up, they are guided to the last person they need to speak with, Nerissa. She has come to the business office to say goodbye to Bigby before she leaves town. He notices the ribbon and she explains that she isn't quite ready to forget what has happened. Nerissa finally explains to Bigby the whole truth of how the murders started. Faith, Lily, and she had planned to escape from the Pudding 'N Pie, but Faith revealed a stolen picture of Crane and Lily for leverage. Nerissa, hoping for mercy, ended up revealing this to Georgie out of fear that the blackmail was too dangerous. Instead, she heard the Crooked Man tell Georgie to "take care" of them (Faith and Lily at least). She continues to reveal that she may have lied a bit in her testimony, but that she knows he wanted Georgie to kill them and that he had committed many other crimes. Bigby, while frustrated by the lying, is assured that the Crooked Man needed to pay for his crimes. Nerissa also admits to putting the heads on the steps of the Woodlands in hopes of getting Bigby's attention.

This is all satisfying knowledge that wraps up most of the player's doubts about the crimes and resolution. However, the ultimate moment of the scene is the dialogue when Nerissa turns to leave. After telling Bigby that he really has changed things in Fabletown, she turns back to him and says the same line Faith does in the introduction, "You're not as bad as everyone says you are." This singular quote leaves Bigby in silence for a moment, before a series of memories play through his head. There is a rapid playthrough of quotes from Faith and Nerissa saying similar things, actions they both seemed to take, Faith's backstory, Nerissa's introduction, and even Snow White telling him that the doctor wanted to run more tests on Faith's body. This all builds into Bigby having a realization and the player gets to either "[Go After Her]" or "[Let Her Go]." No matter the choice, the last line the player hears before a blackout and the end of the game is a memory of Faith saying, "I'll see you around... Wolf" (Faith, Ep. 5). It's an intensely immersive and shocking moment to end on, and a genius one as well.

Not only does this ending spark the player's curiosity about a continuation of the story, but it also makes people want to go back and replay the game to find any clue about it that they may have overlooked. This singular scene has initiated years of discourse amongst fandom members. Has this been Faith disguised as Nerissa the entire game? Or was Nerissa disguised as Faith when you first met her? Fans have been sorting through clues for almost a decade to find even a shred of fully conclusive evidence about what the truth is, and though they will never truly know, it makes everyone excited and happy over it. In my mind that is both the highlight and mark of what a stunning game this is.

Critical Reception

IGN, [Ep 1: 9.0/10 - Ep 2: 8.5/10 - Ep 3: 9.2/10 - Ep 4: 6.0/10 - **Ep 5: 9.3/10**], Marty Sliva – "This is no fanciful romp through children stories," (Sliva 2013) the source material (Fables) is a very dark fairytale, and *The Wolf Among Us* "...uses a system of choices and consequential events... to make players face the grim reality of this world." (Sliva 2013) For the reviews on the parts of the game that this analysis focuses on: Episode One was reviewed as, "An amazing first step into Telltale's beautiful new world..." (Sliva 2013), and Episode Five was reviewed as, "A fantastic finale, and some of the best work Telltale has ever done." (Sliva 2013)

GameSpot, 8/10, Justin Clark –

The Wolf Among Us is "sobering, sad, and tense, and occasionally, it even has time to be magical..." (Clark 2014). Telltale's strength is in the stories of their games, and their narrative shines particularly brightly here. Even though the "...cel-shaded graphics are very much 1980s four-color comic pulp come to life, the aesthetic built within them... [captures] the density of 1980s' New York along with the sense of dingy isolation, backed by a minimalist, appropriately synthy score..." (Clark 2014).

Lessons

Characterized world-building makes everything else in the story more interesting.

In theatre, I've been told before that, "If you understand the world that you live in and what's happening, everything else will happen." This is somewhat true for games as well and it's apparent in *The Wolf Among Us*. This game's narrative consistently excels in creating a world characterized by the Fable characters and their stories. When you play, you don't need the entire picture to understand or be invested in what's happening. With enough of certain story aspects developed and understood, paired with the right game mechanics, overcompensating by giving the player every little detail is unnecessary. In fact, the small details a narrative designer doesn't highlight will become even more interesting if this world-building technique is used. It allows players to enjoy and understand the story on whatever level of investment they would like.

Morally gray characters can be more fun to play than the average protagonist.

One of the best parts of playing *The Wolf Among Us* and something that sticks with players is the character development of the protagonist, Bigby Wolf. Given that Bigby has a more villainous/antagonistic past, but is actively working toward changing that and turning over a new leaf, the player is given a lot of jurisdiction over how he decides to do his job. Not having the pressure of needing to live up to certain "good" character traits can make a story more fun to explore. These traits also make Bigby more relatable and interesting to play. Instead of being a perfectly upstanding citizen, Bigby focuses on what he can do as an average person, which is much more fascinating to navigate than someone with a black-and-white sense of good vs bad.

Make the gameplay accessible so the writing can also be clear.

The gameplay Telltale uses for their games is not complex, but it's effective for storytelling. It's not necessarily that these mechanics are simple, but it's that they don't distract from the important pieces of the plot the player may need to pick up on. Quick Time Events, paired with moments of investigation, are the main mechanics of *The Wolf Among Us*. However, any style of gameplay that works *with* the narrative and not just in addition to it, helps players pick up more story details. Accessibility does not always mean easy gameplay, but rather, something intuitive with everything else in the game.

Sometimes leaving loose ends is just as (if not more) effective than tying them up.

If *The Wolf Among Us* teaches us anything about storytelling, it's that not every aspect of a story needs to be tied together and resolved. Sometimes leaving a string or two loose creates more of an impact on a player than a game that completely solves itself when it's finished. This is seen especially in the epilogue scene, where the Faith vs Nerissa debate came to life. There are endless questions and observations to be made

surrounding this scene. However, leaving them open-ended has built a really strong and curious community excited for more.

Show, don't tell, but be conscious of what you aren't telling and if you need to.

In interactive media, it's almost always better to show a player/audience something instead of just telling them through dialogue. This is effective and immersive for certain players heavily interested in the narrative elements. However, if the writers are not fully conscious of the stories they're facilitating, it can easily result in misinterpretations and botched themes. Being extra cautious about the narratives we establish/push using our media is an extremely important job as a game designer.

Summation

The Wolf Among Us deals with timeless themes and a unique way of storytelling that is endlessly worth analyzing in the pursuit of narrative-based games. Its dark material mixed with a unique character to explore the world with creates an unforgettable experience for any player. The relatable characters, and NPCs from every walk of life, also make it a work of empathetic art. Storytelling is one of the constant keystones of Telltale's games, and yet, *The Wolf Among Us* rises above many. The game has stayed a pinnacle of the studio's successes even after its death and rebirth. Now that the studio has been revived, their first release is potentially the sequel, *The Wolf Among Us 2*, making the impact of the original more relevant than ever before.

Citations

Clark, J. (2014, December 5). *The Wolf Among Us Review*. GameSpot. Retrieved November 27, 2022, from <https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/the-wolf-among-us-review/1900-6415981/>

Miyamoto, K. (2022, November 28). *Plot vs. story: What's the difference?* ScreenCraft. Retrieved December 1, 2022, from <https://screencraft.org/blog/plot-vs-story-whats-the-difference/#:~:text=The%20story%20is%20about%20the,everything%20within%20that%20story%20happens.>

Ruberg, B. (2018). Representing sex workers in video games: Feminisms, fantasies of exceptionalism, and the value of Erotic Labor. *Feminist Media Studies*, 19(3), 313–330. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1477815>

Sliva, M. (2013, October 15). *The Wolf Among Us Review*. IGN. Retrieved November 27, 2022, from <https://www.ign.com/articles/2013/10/15/the-wolf-among-us-review>

Wikimedia Foundation. (2022, November 12). *The Wolf Among Us*. Wikipedia. Retrieved November 27, 2022, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Wolf_Among_Us#Characters

The Wolf Among Us. Fables Wiki. (n.d.). Retrieved November 27, 2022, from https://fables.fandom.com/wiki/Category:The_Wolf_Among_Us