GAME REVIEW

A slow but promising start

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Developer: Deck Nine Games
Publisher: Square Enix
Engine: Unity
Platforms: PC, PS4, XB1
Release Date: August 31, 2017

Shortly after a concept art leak, Life Is Strange: Before the Storm was announced in E3 2017 as a spin-off of Life Is Strange. The heavy critical acclaim of the original series meant the spin-off had pretty big shoes to fill. The first (out of three) episode, "Awake", was released on August 31, 2017.

Minor story spoilers follow

Set two years before the events of Life Is Strange, Before the Storm follows the story of a sixteen-year old Chloe Price who is struggling in her life following the death of her father and the sudden disappearance of her best friend Max. Things are worsened by the fact that she has a hard time getting along with her mother's boyfriend, David. However, things start taking a turn for the better when she befriends Rachel Amber, one of her classmates from Blackwell. The rest of the episode revolves around Chloe and Rachel bonding.

The main attraction of Life Is Strange is its narrative. I felt like Before the Storm sort of fell flat in that department. The pacing of the story is all over the place. The story-telling is excruciatingly slow in the first half. The second half, on the contrary, is very rushed. Near the end of the episode, Chloe and Rachel say that what they have together is special. This felt very weird considering the fact that they have been together for less than one day.

I headed into Before the Storm expecting the exact same gameplay of the main series. To my surprise, I did notice some changes, both positive and negative, in the gameplay. There's a new mechanic called Talkback which are essentially the turning points of the plot of the game. In these sequences, an argument is started between Chloe and another character and the gamer has to make the proper dialogue choices to make the story go in a positive direction. There's a HUD that shows gamer's progress in the Talkback sequences. While the controls for controllers are unchanged, you now need both the keyboard and the mouse to make choices if you are not using a controller. I found this change in controls so annoying that I ultimately decided to hook up my DS4 with the PC.

Visually, Before the Storm is very similar to Life Is Strange. However, the switch from Unreal Engine to Unity is made quite obvious by the absence of the original's high quality lighting and shadows. Optimisation on the PC version did not feel that great as well since I faced increased loading times and occasional stutters despite meeting the system requirements.

Life Is Strange is known for its excellent voice acting and soundtrack. Before the Storm manages to deliver the same level of excellence in terms of the voice acting despite not having award-winning actress Ashly Burch in the cast. The soundtrack, however, is not nearly as memorable as Life Is Strange.

Since Max (and her time-rewinding powers) is absent, the game mostly boils downs to walking around and making obvious dialogue choices. Thankfully, the ending of the episode was powerful enough to still keep me interested in the series.

Nony Khondaker is an introvert who complements his non-existent social life with video games, Netflix and a whole lot of ice-cream. Send him memes and cat videos to cheer him up at fb.com/NonyKhondaker

Pixel Eternal

NUREN IFTEKHAR

My first memories of video games were in an arcade near our house. It had a stained floor, a noisy atmosphere and one too many people. It also had little worlds inside. Ones that were easy to get lost into. The games we grew up loving, were far, far behind the technologically advanced and breathtakingly beautiful games that are being released today. And yet, if we pick up Contra or Super Mario Bros. right now we would find ourselves immersed in a minute by dint of engaging gameplay and the mellow lights of nostalgia.

And it's perhaps this same train of thought that can explain the resurgence of pixelated graphics in gaming seen in recent times. This intentional 'step back' wasn't just an ode to the past but done so for a more practical reason. The revolution of the indie gaming scene was facilitated due to the possibility of production cost being scaled down. To do so significant cut in the graphics department had to be made. 3D graphics has a bad habit of being dated in an alarming speed. What was considered an acceptable 3D model would be looked at as an eyesore just a year later. Pixelated graphics however, does not suffer from this problem as the art style has its own pull even if it's backdated. Because the idea of being dated does not apply to it, it's an art style of its own. Not just any art style, but one that brings with it an air of nostalgia.

Nostalgia might have been the biggest pull that led pixelated graphics to be widely accepted. A fine example will be Shovel Knight. This crowdfunded indie gem had such a comfortable SNES feel to it that the players couldn't help but feel like that young kid in front of the arcade machine. A memorable tribute to platformers of the old, Shovel Knight was critically acclaimed for its gameplay, fluid control and level-design. Shovel Knight didn't just depend on the nostalgia to build its reputation. They shone through on their own brilliance which was accentuated by the art style.

Stardew Valley is also a game that deserves particular mention. The game was singlehandedly made by the sole developer who goes by the moniker ConcernedApe. The pixelated graphics to it had such a loving charm which went beyond the original IP it was inspired from, the Harvest Moon series. While Harvest Moon adapted to the modern times and went for a 3D graphical style, Stardew Valley harked back to the Gameboy era graphical style and found more success.

Video games have always had multiple aspects to it. It's an amalgamation of story, gameplay, characters, graphics, soundtracks and so much more. Pixelated graphics often allow experimentation in other sectors that would not have been possible otherwise. Inventive games of recent times such as 'Undertale', 'Papers, Please', 'Terraria', 'The Binding of Isaac' and so on all resorted to it to great results. Employment of this beloved graphical style has not lessened by any margin. An interesting spin on the classic RTS formula was done by the recently released title Tooth and Tail. A widely cheered E3 presentation showed glimpses from the stunningly artistic upcoming cyberpunk title 'The Last Night'. One thing is for sure, pixelated graphics is here to stay as its appeal transcends technical advancement and brings with it a charm and comfort that can't be replicated.

Nuren Iftekhar is your local stray cat in disguise; he interacts with people for food and hates bright light. He got Hufflepuff 3 times straight in Pottermore so no walking around that one. Send him obscure memes at n.iftekhar18@gmail.com