

Narrative Development for Green Reaper

By El Schaefer

Design Process

I was brought onto the Slippers team midway through development to act as their primary narrative designer and bring a more concrete story to the game, a task which I eagerly accepted. We looked to use narrative detail to establish more concrete meaning and stakes for player action, and a strong emotional arc to mirror and bolster engagement with gameplay. The game already had some strong established concepts for me to work with – a lone warrior, a garden being overrun by fungi, a mysterious statue players worked to purify. Within this framework, I aimed to build up narrative primarily through characterization, establishing individual personalities, interpersonal dynamics, and personal stakes to add emotional significance to players' goals. I started by going all-out with a no-holds-barred “dream concept” – detailed cinematics, 5 enemy types and a final boss, complex characterization, none of which I expected to reach the final product unaltered – to get all my ideas on paper and reviewable by the team. The reality of narrative development is that the majority of what you develop will never make it to the player, and rather than be disheartened by this, I choose to embrace it, as I've found establishing the “big picture” from the start makes it easier to differentiate the meaningful and essential from the redundant or extraneous, to pare down to the core concepts without over-limiting. With the central ideas established, I consulted with programmers, animators, and gameplay developers on what they or I could implement, adjust, or cut – the team was quite receptive to story-based suggestions, and gameplay development (animation, level design, etc.) was shaped by narrative just as much as vice-versa. While characters were cut and cinematics were simplified, we held strong to a core vision, and I believe I did well guiding the addition of an impactful story.

Narrative Overview

Once, the greenhouse was peaceful – plants grew strong, flowers bloomed bright, all under the guidance of the garden goddess Antheia. But that peace has been disturbed by invaders, malignant mushrooms who have come to drain Antheia's divine power and destroy the garden she so loves. With the last of her strength, the grieving goddess summons a champion, bringing to life a rose named Rubin. It is their task – and the players' – to drive out the fungal forces with their sacred scythe and purify the garden as Antheia's chosen, the Green Reaper.

Characters:

Rubin – Player character, unlikely chosen hero (named for their red coloration). Determined, dutiful.

Antheia – Imperiled goddess of the garden (named after and based on the real Greek goddess). Empathetic, wise, maternal, divine.

Mushrooms – Enemy invaders. Brutish, power-hungry, selfish, sadistic.

Trailer

The trailer is meant to be potential players' first enticing exposure to the game's core concepts, including its story and stakes. My original draft for the trailer was much longer, more dramatic and expository. However, under the given time limit, we figured gameplay should be prioritized over excessive dialogue interstices, so (much like the game's story itself) it was cut down to the essentials (while still keeping it interesting!). The trailer features Antheia speaking to the player, indicated by the editing associating her with the text and said text being in her designated in-game font.

(Logos)

(Establishing shot of the greenhouse)

I call to you in my hour of need

(Antheia corrupting)

Rise, my darling Rubin

(Rubin spawns in)

The fungi have turned against us

(Gameplay footage)

Be my Champion

(Gameplay footage)

(Title Card: Green Reaper)

(Credits)

Areas

To help distinguish challenges from each other and establish a sense of progression, checkpoints doubled as area indicators with popups to indicate the name of the area, as well as some flavor from Antheia to provide context, guidance, and characterization (which again was in her font). Major arenas also got flavor popups from Antheia to go with the purification animations at the end.

Area 1: The Overgrowth

Intro Flavor: All my wild ones in fungal fetters...

End Message: Be free, my wildlings!

Inspirations: The first area contains some of the densest, most unkempt greenery in the game; I figured as much as Antheia is the goddess of gardening, a very ordered process, she would love all plants in her domain.

Area 2: The Carmine Heights

Intro Flavor: Follow the roses, Rubin... follow your kind.

Inspirations: The area was originally called the “Violet Heights,” as it’s decorated with African violets, but after it was decided that purple would be reserved for enemies and the set dressing changed color, the name was similarly changed for clarity. I used this opportunity to emphasize red as the color to follow, reinforcing the guidance and Rubin’s nature to players.

Area 3: Risen Langenlatter

Intro Flavor: Take back these verdant blades, my warrior!

Inspirations: “Risen” is for the area being made up of hanging pots, while “Langenlatter” is a corruption of *schlangenblatter*, from the folktale “The Three Snake-Leaves” – the area being decorated with snake plants reminded me of the tale, which centers around both plants and healing, which I felt apropos.

Area 4: Solanacea

Intro Flavor: Send these fiends to rest among the nightshades.

End Message: Heal your roots and fruits, my children...

Inspirations: This arena is surrounded by tomato plants, which are members of the nightshade family *Solanaceae*. To reinforce tone, I referenced their more negative, poisonous aspects in the more combative text, and their positive, food-based aspects in purification (as well as reminding people that yes, tomatoes are fruits).

Area 5: The Hollow Hermaic

Intro Flavor: Stone walls, hallowed ground – will nothing stop them?

End Message: Let these stones be sanctuary once again!

Inspirations: Pulling from Antheia's ancient Greek inspiration, I connected the stones surrounding the arena to Greek herms, piled boundary stones invoking the protection of the god Hermes.

Area 6: Scala Gloriosa

Intro Flavor: Let none stop you along the way of leaves.

Inspirations: "Gloriosa" references the morning glories which decorate the area – I considered changing it to "monstera" after the leaves the player jumps across, but that brought negative associations we didn't want at that point in the story. The area was initially a bit more vertical, hence the choice of "Scala" (stairway), but we figured with some poetic license jumping between leaves still fit the description well enough.

Area 7: Stargazers' Roost

Intro Flavor: They would even steal the sky from you...

End Message: You're free, dreamers - drink in the sun!

Inspirations: The area being both elevated towards the sky and decorated with stargazer lilies made this name a clear choice.

Area 8: Pots of Polyidus

Intro Flavor: Return to me, my champion, my darling...

Inspirations: Dipping back into Greek mythology, I referenced the healer Polyidus. This story being the precedent of the folktale referenced in Area 3 (Risen Langenlatter), it felt appropriate to reference in another snake plant heavy area. The story's mythological and healing associations made it seem appropriate to reference when the player believes they are returning to Antheia – but like how Polyidus revoked the hope for knowledge from his patient and student Glaucus, the area is a bait-and-switch as players are plunged from an apparent happy ending into the final arena.

Area 9: Antheia's Umbra

Intro Flavor: Have care, my child – I cannot lose you too!

End Message: Oh, my dear Rubin... you have saved us all.

Inspirations: This area is so named for its ominous, shadowy position below Antheia's statue. This being the final, most dangerous encounter, Antheia shows deep concern for the player, and relief, gratitude, and praise when they succeed.

Mid-Screen Flavor

Adding flavor text to the loading and death screens for additional characterization was one of the earliest implemented ideas for dialogue. These lines would provide characterization to both Antheia and the mushrooms, establishing their dynamics as players started and played through the game. As lines would be displayed at random in various contexts, each would have to stand largely on its own and be fairly versatile. Being displayed at the beginning of the game, the lines could be somewhat mysterious to draw players in but would have to have easily discoverable meanings in order to be rewarding. Who said which line was differentiated by font, with Antheia having an elegant script and the mushrooms speaking in a bold, uneven scrawl.

Antheia:

Rise, my Rubin, rise...

Help me, Rubin... heal our world...

I know I ask much of you, my rose...

Do not fear, my children... help is coming.

They would use my own power against my children...

I can feel them... eating away at me...

Please, no more – have mercy, mushrooms...

Peace, my fungal fellows – end this suffering!

Mushrooms:

Weep for your children, Antheia... water us in tears...

The goddess would send this broken bud to defeat us?

Go forth, fungal forces, and purge these pestilent plants!

Foolish flower... you, challenge our mycelial might?