**Aesthetic Analysis**

Guacamelee!

Summary

“Guacamelee” is a side scrolling “beat ‘em up” turned metroidvania video game. Players are drawn into the world through the strongest and most noticeable aspect; its appearance. The game features a Mexican theme through a vibrant, colourful world, filled with lights, life, and death. The game does a decent job at holding players’ attention as they fight the army of the dead to save El Presidente’s daughter. “Guacamelee!” only has a small cast of characters, detracting further from its basic story. While the game also tries to present a strong combat system, it ultimately falls flat later in the game as abilities make enemies trivial. Through further analysis, “Guacamelee” will be broken down into its bare component to determine whether the game is truly appealing aesthetically or not.

Graphical Style

The most prominent and strongest aesthetic in “Guacamelee” is the graphical style. The game uses clever combinations of solid colours and basic shapes to create scenes that are appealing and enjoyable. They instil a natural sense of fun and excitement when presented through the Mexican theme. The theme is divided up into two major planes of existence; the living world and the dead world. The living world uses an earthy colour pallet of green, brown, and orange to display the colours of Mexico. Even with the variety in locations, such as the temple, giant tree, and even in towns, the game is consistent in its earthy tones never making the player feel estranged. This greatly helps when differentiating the living world from the dead world. The dead world has a negative colour filter feel, consistently using a blue to purple colour range. Since these tones are so diverse from each other, it is easy for the player to differentiate the two worlds and identify which they are currently in. This strengthens the readability of gameplay as switching between these worlds is a major part of the game, used to solve puzzles, reach new locations, and even defeat bosses. Another piece of the graphical style is their use of Shapes. Rigid and simple is the design philosophy they appear to use for every character and scenery the developers create in “Guacamelee.” Due to this design, it is easy to identify characters such as enemies from the scenery. The main character, Juan, for example, stands out from any scenery due to his large and imposing body. The very clear cut lines of his shape allow for easy identification of where the main character is at any given time. Take the basic skeleton soldier as an example as well. The designers could have created them as actual skeletons with plenty of small bones making up the body. Instead, they gave the skeletons a triangular poncho to give them a more basic shape and a clear, solid colour, making them easily identifiable. Combining these two aspects of simple shape and solid colour, “Guacamelee!” has created a way to make a design that is both generally appealing and very easy to identify. One example that, literally, stands out is the bosses. The Alebrije, for instance, is built of such simplistic shapes and a consistent solid colour that he is easily identifiable in any of the situations you find him early in the game. Ultimately, this design makes the game not only beautiful, but easy to play due to the added clarity.

Gameplay and Balance

The aesthetic of gameplay and balance is where “Guacamelee!’ begins to fall apart. The game attempts to add diversity in gameplay through adding new fighting moves to the luchador’s skill set. These new moves can unlock new locations on the map, but really that’s it. These new moves are also supposed to add new depth to the combat allowing for longer juggling combos and new ways to quickly dispatch enemies. The problem is that this is completely unnessecary. I found that it was very infrequent that I would use these new abilities in combat. Specifically, players will find they fight the same enemy through a majority of the game, the skeleton. By a quarter way through the game the skeleton enemy becomes so trivial they are run through with a few regular punches without fear. The only time any special move would be used is if my character was already heading in the direction of an enemy and I need some form of invinsability, in the form of an initiating attack, to enter the space the enemy occupies. For example, a floating platform with a skeleton occupying the space could not be reached as I would take damage jumping into the enemy. Using the uppercut abilitiy, I can strike the enemy first to avoid damage and reach the platform unharmed. The problem is found in analysing how this mechanic plays out in in-game use. If a combat based upgrade is not enjoyable or optimal for combat, then that upgrade should not be combat based. I would be more satisfied if the upgrade had just been a double jump, because that is all it is ever used for. Moves such as the head butt and body slam are at least used to break walls to unlock new areas or discover secrets, where the act of distruction makes sense to be transferable to cause damage as well, as a convenience but not as a primary use. The uppercut on the other hand had no use aside from being use as a double jump. While I understand that being a luchador the upgrades being combat based is a logical thought, however in execution it is never used as such and thus feels underwhelming.

Audio

The audio in “Guacamelee!” is a mized bag of greatness and misuse. It boasts some of the most fitting Mexican themed music I have heard in a video game. Every location and battle sequence has well composed music, but it is used highly incorrectly. Multiple instances throughout the game I felt completely disoriented by a disconnect between the music and what was currently happening on screen. For example, during the first boss fight I ready for the intense battle, but it was completely diminished by the music in the background which did not associate with the current fight. The music sounded more like casual level music when compared to the numbers I have been hearing throughout the game so far. Music, while the average player does not directly pay attention to it, it greatly sets the mood and intensity of the moment. It can be used to convey feelings at a moment or even provide context to a living world. The misuse can even be heard in the regular world while running through the first town where a grim music plays consistently. This gave a somber yet tense feeling when really, nothing was happening. There was no enemies and no immiediate danger. In fact, it was the calm after the storm. This was completely offputting and really unimersed me from the game. Overall, while the music is good, its use is everything, and “Guacamelee!” did not correctly use their exelent scores to evoke emotion or properly frame situations throughout the game.