

Narrative Outline — Shadeshifter

Narrative Requirements

- Since Metroidvanias are driven by action, the story must be unintrusive. Instead of focusing on an elaborate plot, the aesthetics of the locations and characters, the backstory, and the mechanics should convey most of the narrative.
- Games from small, unknown studios cannot afford long intro sequences. They must get to the “good stuff” immediately or the player will switch to another game. The gameplay of Shadeshifter must start right away. The story slowly drips in afterwards.
- The story must explain the origin of the protagonist and his unique shapeshifting ability, as well as any restrictions that might be placed on it (e.g., which characters the player cannot transform into).
- There has to be a clear goal and motivation for the protagonist that becomes more and more apparent to the player throughout the game.
- The narrative has to define the setting of the prototype level and explain its limitations (e.g., why are there so few creatures and no friendly NPCs in the first level?).

Prototype Level

Shadeshifter starts in a demolished workroom. The corpse of a humanoid eagle decorates the floor. Our protagonist, a shadow creature with human features, emerges from a puddle of black liquid. The strange fluid comes from a water tank with a broken casing in the background.

The gameplay starts and the player gains control over Slate, the protagonist of Shadeshifter. He exits the workroom and finds himself in wrecked laboratory building. There are rooms that look like former prison cells, but whoever the inmates were, it looks like they forced their way out of the confinement. Dozens of dead eagles seem to support this hypothesis. The only living things in this ruined place are hostile creatures, ugly mutations that look like combinations of several animals. They are hyper-aggressive and immediately attack Slate when they see him. Strangely—and to his own surprise—Slate is able to transform into these beings after he has slain them.

The player continues to explore the laboratory, searching for an exit. In a vast, open room, he stumbles upon something that catches his eye: A giant water tank, not unlike the one Slate emerged from, but more than five times its size. The glass cover has been broken with significant strength and the water is slowly flooding the room. A faded label at the bottom of the tank reads “PJT MNIH”.

Shortly afterwards, the player reaches the exit of the building. The gates of the laboratory are being guarded by an impressive hybrid creature. Several of the mutations the player encountered before are flocking to the gates and the guard allows them to pass. Once Slate tries to leave, the guard immediately attacks him. After this boss fight, Slate transforms into the guard and the screen fades to black.

Background

The world of Shadeshifter is inhabited by humanoid animals that live together peacefully—for the most part...

The eagle-people were known as a species of great scientists, highly respected among the other tribes. Naturally, their curiosity was given free rein and their research grew ever-more ambitious and dubious. It did not take long until they stumbled upon something that should have been left uninspected. They awakened an ancient monster that began terrorizing the world. It took the joint effort of all the tribes to put it back to sleep, but in the process, dozens of settlements had been destroyed and countless people had lost their lives. The once-reputable eagle-people were ostracized, many of them slaughtered by the other tribes. Those who are still alive were forced into isolation.

Some of them did not put up with it: A group of eagle-people sought shelter in a hidden laboratory, the place where Shadeshifter begins. They initiated “Project Midnight”, a desperate attempt to save their species. The scientists among them started experimenting with genetics, mixing the DNA of animals with other animals and molecules, like the ones you find in adamant rocks or poisonous liquids. In addition to that, they found a way to alter the genes of their subjects to supercharge their aggressive tendencies. The results of their research soon filled the prison cells of the laboratory. Their plan was to build an army of mutated creatures to wipe out the other tribes before there were no more eagle-people around. However, they had no influence on the behavior of their hostile creations.

In order to solve this problem, they decided to combine the genes of all the life forms they had made to give birth to a super-organism that would keep the other creatures under control and make sure they acted out the scientists’ plan. This is the origin of Lady Midnight, a giant shadow creature and the main antagonist of the game. She controls the actions of all the mutated creatures and pursues a single goal: the destruction of all the tribes and everyone who gets in her way. Unfortunately, “everyone who gets in her way” included the scientists in the laboratory who thought it was way too early to release Lady Midnight when she destroyed the casing of the water tank that confined her. Lady Midnight helped the creatures break out of their prisons and left the laboratory with most of her underlings to complete the task that was given to her.

Shortly before Lady Midnight’s unplanned release, one of the scientists was tormented with doubt about their project. He had a change of heart and knowing that nobody currently alive would be able to stop Lady Midnight, he devised a risky plan: He copied the DNA of the shadow creature and combined it with some of his own genes, hoping that the life form that emerged would develop its own consciousness and conscience. The same way the eagle-people programmed Lady Midnight to destroy the other tribes, he made sure that his creation’s goal would be to prevent this from happening. His experiment resulted in the

birth of a smaller shadow creature with an odd propensity to change shapes. He called it Slate, for a blank slate may become anything...

The game begins when Slate has grown strong enough to escape the water tank. His creator died days ago, when Lady Midnight and the mutated creatures took over the laboratory. Slate does not know where or who he is. Yet, it is clear to him that he exists for one reason: to stop someone. Someone he will recognize when he sees them.

Plot

The plot revolves around the mystery of Slate's existence and his purpose. In the first level, the player notices the giant water tank that somebody or something broke free from. After the introduction in the laboratory, they travel the world of Shadeshifter and learn what happened to it: both, the more recent invasion of the mutations and the past actions of the eagle-people that nearly led to an apocalypse.

As the player explores the game world, they learn about Lady Midnight and Slate's origin. They anticipate that she will be the final boss of the game and they are wondering why she is nowhere to be found if her goal is to simply annihilate the tribes.

Towards the end of the game, the player makes the discovery that Lady Midnight is retracing the steps of the eagle-people when they awakened the ancient monster. She had heard the scientists discuss these events when she was still growing in the water tank. It turns out that she considers waking up the monster the most efficient way of destroying all the tribes. In the final fight, Slate transforms into Lady Midnight and uses her control over the mutations to save the world from the threat that has been slumbering since the eagle-people fell from grace.