# The Meaning Of Justice in Pyre*

## Rehab or Exile

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**Abstract**

*Pyre* takes a stance on many modern-day issues with culture and humanity, especially that of the outcast. The stances *Pyre* takes on these issues can be considered controversial by some. But also a meaningful discussion for others since many people have not had to deal with it personally. The outcasting of members of society is a punishment that very few fully understand, and *Pyre* poses this horrendous position in a more digestible format. We all know that exile is undesirable, but we can also see that within *Pyre*, their return is exceptionally conditional; very few ever escape, and this is a blazing Pyre in itself to today's justice. Pyre poses the controversial question, should members of society be exiled for their crimes, whether in prison or otherwise? *Pyre* shows us the members of the triumvirates are more than just characters; they have emotions and grow from their experiences much like real people. *Pyre* proves the point that when civilization does not want something visible or present, they send it away, just like in many large cities with their more disadvantaged populations. *Pyre* calls into question what is the true meaning of justice, Can People grow, and whether we can as humans, see the humanity within each other.

## Introduction:

*Pyre* takes a stance on many modern-day issues with culture and humanity, especially that of the outcast. *Pyre* prompts a meaningful play experience that many players will gloss over without paying close attention to. The outcasting of members of society is a punishment that very few fully understand, and *Pyre* poses this horrendous predicament, that affects many of our peers, in a more digestible format. We all know that exile is undesirable, but we can also see that within *Pyre*, their return is exceptionally conditional; very few ever escape, and this is a blazing *Pyre* in itself to today's justice systems. *Pyre* poses the controversial question, should members of society be exiled for their crimes? As this question is posed, we can see the alternative suggested by reading the game's subtext. And understanding even the most neutral position is still a position.[1] *Pyre* also demonstrates that the members of the triumvirates are more than just characters[2]; they have emotions and grow from their experiences, much like real people.[3] We see that these characters can learn and grow from what they were exiled for, just like members of our society that are shown mercy.[4] With the understanding that redemption and return to the corrupt society is the goal, we see the same pattern in many societies many times before in domestic and foreign cultures alike that will exile those who it does not think will fit in. *Pyre* calls into question what is the true meaning of justice, Can People grow, and whether we can, as humans, see the humanity within each other, and do we as a society have that in mind, or do we just want to treat the symptoms?

### Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation is one of the most critical pieces of learning and growing as a human is to make mistakes. As a child, you might scrape your knee or fall over; how did this happen? A mistake; plain and simple, we all learn from mistakes. *Pyre* brings to our attention within the first 5 minutes of gameplay that, you have been exiled to the downside for being able to read.[5] We can see that even after the first few minutes of gameplay that something about this world is unsettling. Carrying on, we discover that other characters have been exiled for various reasons, some for seemingly good reasons like smuggling or desertion, Rukey, and Jodariel, respectively, but in some cases, the exile is completely unwarranted with Sir Gilman as an example, having committed no actual crime[6], we see that these characters have not been given a chance to argue why they should have stayed in the upper world, they have been given no opportunity to

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[1] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Gabriel Rockhill English (Bloomsbury, 2013).

[2] SuperGiant, "Pyre" (SuperGiant Games, July 2017), https://www.supergiantgames.com/games/pyre/.

[3] Robert Apel, Daniel Nagin, and Raymond Paternoster, "The Relationship Between Prison Sentences and Recidivism Reconsidered," *Criminology* Volume 49, no. Issue 1 (2011): 79–110, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.2010.00222.x.

[4] Apel, Nagin, and Paternoster.

[5] David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (London, EN: Melville House, 2015).

[6] Fandom, "Wiki Page Characters," Wiki, *Pyre Wiki*, n.d., https://pyre.fandom.com/.

do so. We can look at ourselves as humans in the same light that we look at these characters; we see them as individuals, each with their own personalities and difficulties that they need to overcome, just like people do. Taking a look into how our justice systems can see those who make even a small mistake like petty theft are given the kick; even if they serve time, they still are likely to go back to their ways[7], but if we look at people who have committed the same crime but have been treated in a humane way they move on and in a large portion of the people that are rehabilitated they contribute significantly less to the recidivism rate of the population.[8]

*Pyre* points out to us that the outrageousness of sending people away for little to nothing will not actually solve the problem, much like regimes around the world tend to do when they do not get their way, and we see that the commonwealth does the same.[9] we must look at each and every possible case that people are going through in our justice systems much like we look and analyze the stories of the characters of *Pyre*, we empathize and pick our favorites, but we always listen to the details of each of their stories, we are rooting for them. We understand that exiling away those who cause problems solves the issues temporarily, but in the long term, it creates many more issues; the main one we will focus on is repeating offenses and recidivism. An article written by Jamie Santa Cruz and published in Knowable magazine breaks down a study of convicted persons who repeat offending after different lengths of prison sentences. It was found that the longer the prison sentences that were handed down to the offender correlated directly with the percentage of recidivism in that group of offenders.[10] we can look at the correlation within *Pyre*. We can see that ironically, the end of the game, depending on the ending that you reached, shows that this recidivism is very accurate in terms that they were exiled for life, and then when they make it back to the surface, they then immediately start a coup d'état.[11]

**Hiding Away the Undesirables**

We all know that prison is not a very pretty idea, nor is it something we really want to think about; we can see in *Pyre* that since many of the characters are there without reason, we must draw some conclusion about why theta re there, we look at the different pieces of society that many do not want to see, or even necessarily think about. Sir Gilman or Bertrude, or even any of the harps. Compared to many modern systems like American or Canadian prison and justice systems, the ratios of certain groups are disparaging to specific demographics.[12] While SuperGiant, the developer and publisher of *Pyre*, may not have been

[7]Jamie Santa Cruz, "Rethinking Prison Deterrent Future Crime," *Knowable Magazine*, July 2022, https://knowablemagazine.org/article/society/2022/rethinking-prison-deterrent-future-crime.

[8]Santa Cruz.

[9]SuperGiant, "Pyre."

[10]Santa Cruz, "Rethinking Prison Deterrent Future Crime."

[11]SuperGiant, "Pyre."

[12]Jeremy Travis, "But They All Come Back: Rethinking Prisoner Reentry," *U.S. Department of Justice*, May 2000, https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/181413.pdf.

referring directly to this when they designed this game, I would say it would be quite a stretch to say that the world design in such similarity to ours was not thought of. We see that the commonwealth exiles almost all harps they come in contact with due to the war they are fighting; they also exile Wyrms and other characters they do not want to be seen around. Bertrude is not the most attractive character, and it is quite clear that the commonwealth does not want her around. Even those playing the game casually without thinking about the difficult questions of exile and hard topics will have the complex question of whether they should judge books by their cover like Bertrude or if they will listen to the whole story before making that decision.

The Commonwealth, Much like the examples of cities during bids for the Olympics or other significant events where the world's eye is on them, they will rush to clear those we do not want to see from the streets.[13] This great exodus shows the retaliation of such careless displacement, recidivism, and crime returns.[14] *Pyre* notes that some of the downsides inhabitants were rebels, some were enemies, and some were exiled for being able to read.[15] we look at many cultures around the world this is the case, we as humans tend to be biased, and regardless of where we go, this is the case, including in video games this happens. Harps are disproportionately sent to the downside because of their race. And regardless of the reasoning why we should look into it more deeply and see why the commonwealth makes it clear that they are at war. So in this context, the harps relatively make sense for their exile; in the real world, we see why people are placed into our version of exile. We can look at all of our systems in recorded history, and it never is genuinely fair[16], whether it be a bias or a misunderstanding we should look at all the facts and what the exiles effect will have. we can see into these situations but never really have a say; *Pyre* gives us a chance to experience what this is in the format of a game; we can understand the depth and emotion that each of the people in the real world goes through, much like the characters you would empathize with.[17]

The developers of also bring up how they want us to see the characters as beings that you can connect with and understand their story, and because of this, it gives *Pyre* the ability to bring topics to light that you would not usually be able to see within art, but you need to read in between the lines as Jacques Rancière enlightens us to in the politics of aesthetics everything is saying something even if it is not intended to.[18] So we must delve into the whitespace of *Pyre*. *Pyre* was an in-depth world designed to show the redemption that can be achieved by even the most despicable of people.[19] We need to see these characters for

[13]katie Hyslop, "With Olympics Came New Laws to Sweep up Homeless," October 2009, https://thetyee.ca/News/2009/10/14/OlympicsHomelessLaws/.

[14]Travis, "But They All Come Back."

[15]SuperGiant, "Pyre."

[16]Santa Cruz, "Rethinking Prison Deterrent Future Crime."

[17]Noclip -Video Game Documentaries, "The Making of Pyre - Documentary" (Noclip - Video Game Documentaries, 2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lri6_fIv5hY.

[18]Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*.

[19]Nathan Grayson, "Pyre Review: The Redemption Arc," *Rock, Paper, Shotgun*, July 2017,

the characters they are. Each character is unique, with a differing personality and extremes to one level or another. These extremes are not necessarily in their outward showing personality but can also present themselves within the fabric of who they are in design and personality.[20] In many of their dev talks, the designers mention that world design is just a world design. When asked if the world had any other meaning, they did not respond with any meaningful response, leading it to be believed that it was for players to interpret. But there is meaning within every single fabric of media and games, whether it is trying to say something or otherwise.[21] With each differing stage and redemption, the characters grow in depth and community, causing each of these characters to have community and grow a bond with you.[22] This shows their humanity and their potential to us. As people playing this game, we should see the redemption that can be had. The developers created a world focused on the unjust exile of many and created a world in which we can see the humanity even in characters that lack the trait of being human. As personifications of people, all of these characters show the traits that we need to empathize with others, which is what we do while playing *Pyre*.[23]

**Empathy is a key**

As humans, we can empathize it is what separates us from other life on our planet, and we can understand what it is like to be in someone else's shoes. This is a challenging task for us to do when the person we are trying to empathize with is going through things that we have never gone through or have never known anyone to have gone through. When *Pyre* demonstrates that you have been cast away into the downside for your ability to read, you can see that even though no statement has been made, there is more to this world than meets the eye and is expressly stated.[24] *Pyres'* examples of exile and redemption form a great story and grand finale. With the summation of all the stories colliding in an acceptable ending and solving most of the loose ends, we can conclude that it was a long journey that many would never escape, including many of their own party or others. Much like the justice system, once you have been exiled, even if your exile is for a short time, very little will be the same when you return. We as humans need to have the empathy and compassion to see what we have done wrong and need to work together. When seeing what *Pyre* is trying to tell us, we need to understand that, Empathy is the difference between exile and rehabilitation We as humans need to see the possibilities of how rehabilitation

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https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/pyre-review.

[20] Game Wisdom, "Talking Supergiant Games With Greg Kasavin" (Game Wisdom, May 2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n_Q-nan3zKI.

[21] Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics.*

[22] Joshua Novalis, "The Tie Binds: The Responsibility of the Community in Pyre," *Christ and Pop Culture*, November 2019, https://christandpopculture.com/the-tie-that-binds-the-responsibility-of-community-in-pyre/.

[23] Grayson, "Pyre Review."

[24] Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics.*

can help our society.[25] With empathy, society can see the humanity in those who got into small mistakes and fixes the issues that caused the mistakes in the first place rather than sending them into exile. *Pyre* is a perfect example of learning from your mistakes in how you go about life since its design forces you to continue regardless of a loss or a win. You are forced to learn and move on; you are not sent into a more extended exile but are given a chance to prove yourself during the next trial. And so learning is not just in gameplay or the world itself, but in the story and lessons you can learn from listening and understanding the characters.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, *Pyre* states a fairly prominent case of how we as a society should act toward those who have made mistakes. Mistakes are how we learn, grow, and finally come to understand each other when we fall short of what is expected of us. *Pyres'* in-depth world lore may seem shallow if you play the game with no thought, but as Rancière explains in his book, nothing is without meaning. If you look between the lines of the world and see it as a world that functions much like ours, we then need to see that regardless of what the world states about itself is not always the true meaning behind it. *Pyres* developers say they wanted us to draw our own conclusions about the world.[26] And so we look and see the statements about exile and redemption. Escape from exile comes to very few. And the best way to prevent the issues that offenders can cause when held without reason for long periods is to understand where the problems come from and help them fix and rehabilitate them. As is fully clear, *Pyre's* in-depth world and lore show clearly that the path to fixing what is wrong with justice is that we need more of a chance at redemption without exile.

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[25]Santa Cruz, "Rethinking Prison Deterrent Future Crime."
[26]Wisdom, "Talking Supergiant Games With Greg Kasavin."

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