

"ENSLAVED: ODYSSEY TO THE WEST" (Video Game Review)

Written by Doug Norris

Friday, 15 October 2010 15:20



The age-old adage teaches us that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. Apparently, our post-apocalyptic future changes "his stomach" to "attaching an electrical-impulse mind-controlling headband to his head," or so it appears in ENSLAVED: ODYSSEY TO THE WEST (Namco-Bandai).

Loosely based on the Chinese novel JOURNEY TO THE WEST, ENSLAVED catapults gamers a century and a half or so into our future, after Earth has been wiped clean of human existence and preserved by a fleet of blood-thirsty, bullet-happy robots. Players take the role of Monkey, an aptly named hulking beast of a human who looks like WWE's Jeff Hardy went to a costume party dressed as television's favorite go-to host/chef Guy Fieri.

Monkey carries the classic loner/anti-hero motif and let's his fists and ridiculously honed bōjutsu skills do the talking. Accompanying (or controlling) Monkey is Trip, your average run-of-the-mill, computer-savvy, smoking-hot gymnast.

As the story opens, the two are refugees from a recently crashed slave-ship.

Monkey had lived his life on the run and in hiding prior to capture, while Trip was somehow absconded from her robot-proof compound home. After the two miraculously survive the ship's crash, Trip outfits an unconscious Monkey with a mind-controlling headband that can cause vision blurring migraines should he choose to disobey her command, and instant brain-exploding death if her heart ever stops.

ENSLAVED (designed by Ninja Theory, and a great step forward from their previous outing HEAVENLY SWORD) follows Monkey and Trip as he begrudgingly guides her through a post-apocalyptic New York to reach her home village, a supposedly robot-free self-contained ecosystem. One of the first shining moments of this game lies in the gorgeously rendered vision of nature's reclamation of the Big Apple. The camera will casually point out significant landmarks (Statue of Liberty, Grand Central, Rockefeller Center) that now serve as decaying planters for trees, vines and moss.

The vivid detail and rich texture given to the overgrowth on these once-populated areas helps create a real sense of isolation and enhances the dependency between Monkey and Trip.

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The robot-oppression has since dwindled as human life ceased to exist, but several key-placed turrets and random dormant sentry mechs still populate the region enough to make Monkey and Trip's journey no walk in the park, but they do allow for the combat system to glow as ENSLAVED's other true achievement. Armed with his well-seasoned fists and an electric-charge generating staff, Monkey generally has to draw the mechs into close-quarters combat, and his attacks are quick and vicious. Using an intricately developed combat system, players can collect energy orbs to use as an in-game currency and expand on Monkey's ability.

From brutal bot-bashing to cover-fire, from stun attacks to shield generating, gamers can build a wide variety of combat capability— and they'll desperately need it.

Monkey can only withstand so much damage, and these mechs aren't just your average destroy-all-humans robots; they're quick, covered in blades and gun-barrels, and looking to destroy any meat-bag that crosses their scanning radius. Their harsh metal physiques clash beautifully against the lush landscapes now overtaking the metropolis.

When the bots do attack, ENSLAVED enters a real intense form of gaming, often leaving players with a gasp-and-jump reaction to the mechs' emergence, with a furiously button-mashing spree of attacks to follow.

The first encounter with the "Dog" mech (a sort of insanely-accelerated Truck-a-Saurus) will have most players on a white-knuckled, pulse-pounding race for shelter, and failure to do so results in Monkey's bloody demise.

Quite possibly some of the scariest robots I've ever seen.



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ENSLAVED borrows heavily from other games, but does so in great homage and for the most part succeeds. From platforming to item gathering to partner-assist tactics, this game smacks of all the true elements of an adventure game. The action-game style combat provides the option of a no-holds-barred, take-on-all-comers approach or stealthily sneaking through the mech-infested landscape avoiding any unnecessary scrapes and scuffles.

One unfortunate drawback to ENSLAVED lies in the one-track linear gameplay that generally accompanies the genre, as the brilliantly detailed landscape seems to cry out "Explore!

Explore!"

In the same vein, players will guide Monkey through a somewhat exhausting series of ledge-jumping, climb-here-to-get-there movement puzzles that typically do nothing more than show off his well animated symbian gait.

The excessive puzzles can somewhat overshadow the greatness that lies within the overall experience.

Not to go unmentioned, ENSLAVED boasts some quality direction by Andy Serkis (of LORD OF THE RINGS fame), who also provided the motion-capture for the game's main protagonist Monkey. The game's scripting stands out as well, as the dialogue between Trip and Monkey works hard to explain their relationship amongst the flurry of background events.



In a gaming world dominated by shooters, zombies, and sequel upon sequel, it's refreshing to find a game such as ENSLAVED that takes the risk of building an original single-player linear-story adventure game. Instead of using the traditional run-jump-and-shoot style, ENSLAVED goes a step and a leap further, incorporating gameplay that makes modern action games build franchises.

With the addition of two interesting protagonists and a horde of menacing, terrifying, murderous robots, ENSLAVED provides a unique adventure story that hopefully will not go overlooked in such a kill-happy marketplace.

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ENSLAVED: ODYSSEY TO THE WEST is available now on XBOX 360 and Sony PlayStation 3



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