Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: A Dark Room
Platform: Browser/Mobile
Genre: Text-based game
Release Date: June 10, 2013 (browser)
Developer: Doublespeak Games
Publisher: Doublespeak Games
Game Writer/**Creative Director**/**Narrative Designer:** Michael Townsend

Overview

A Dark Room leads the player through a spartan, text-based landscape as they play as the Wanderer, a character known only by the name of their alien species. The game explains its own lore only sporadically, but as the Wanderer welcomes a feverish woman known as the Builder into their home, they gain the ability to craft traps, huts, and other equipment needed to expand their reach in the world. Eventually, the Builder even allows the Wanderer to take off in a repaired spaceship, returning to their home in the stars and leaving behind a broken, battered world.

The game takes place in three "modes". The Builder's workshop and Wanderer's hut allow trade and crafting. The slowly growing settlement built by the Wanderer requires resource allocation and population management. Outside both, along "A Dusty Path", RPG elements emerge as the player enters an ASCII world, slowly expanding the map as they fight and explore. Throughout all of these, however, the narrative continues to be conveyed in terse, minimalist prose as the story – and its many twists and turns – unfurls.

Characters

There are few characters in *A Dark Room*. Its cast is as sparse as its storytelling, and in some ways, the world itself is more a character than any individual. However, the two significant figures are as follows:

- **The Wanderer** – The protagonist and player avatar, and a member of an alien species. Most of their backstory is communicated through a mobile-only 2014 prequel called *The Ensign* developed by Amir Rajan, who ported *A Dark Room* to iOS after its web release, and is only hinted at in *A Dark Room* itself. Their thoughts and observations of the world serve as the only narration or exposition

provided throughout the game. While initially a typical "blank slate" onto which the player can project themselves, the personality of the Wanderer develops over the game once the player has fully embraced the character's role as their avatar in this world. Their selfishness and single-mindedness become gradually apparent throughout their quest to gain power and, eventually, return to their home planet.

- **The Builder** – A member of the Wanderer's species who volunteers to assist the protagonist after receiving help when she stumbles into the Wanderer's home, feverish and delirious. She is the character with the most dialogue represented, directly or indirectly, via the Wanderer's internal monologue. The terse summaries of what she says – "says she can help. says she builds things." – nevertheless give the impression that she is kind. As the Wanderer becomes crueler and begins to use the Builder as well as the Townsfolk to their own ends, she turns against the protagonist, serving them silently and coldly. It does not seem, by the end, as though she has a choice to leave.

Minor characters exist only in passing in *A Dark Room*. Lone snipers in a grassy field or silent, haggard figures who stand aside as the Wanderer loots their settlements are all that remain of this planet's original civilizations. There are others of the Wanderer's species, too: those who have turned against their own kind and those who have not. Even they do not speak.

Yet even if they are not characters as such, there is one group that deserves mention as well. They are—

- **The Villagers** – The ragged families and loners who wander in to take up residence in the settlement the Builder and the Wanderer set up. They begin as refugees of a sort, taking shelter from the war-wracked world they find themselves in. No true individual characteristics or dialogue are assigned to them. Their primary gameplay function is to be assigned to various professions in order to speed up the player's production of resources. From a narrative perspective, they serve as a mirror for the Wanderer's cruelty, as the protagonist's treatment of the villagers transforms them from people seeking homes into prisoners of the Wanderer, forced to work for their benefit.

Breakdown

There is no title page for Doublespeak Games' 2013 game *A Dark Room*. There are no images, or colors aside from black and grey text on a nearly empty screen. A handful of words – "the fire is dead. the room is freezing." – hang suspended off to one side, leaving the player's attention to drift towards a simple text box that simply says: "light fire."

When the button is pressed, the game answers: "the light from the fire spills from the windows, out into the dark". A pause, then: "the room is cold". As more narration appears above where "the fire is dead" once was written, those first two lines of exposition are pushed further and further towards the bottom of the screen, fading slowly into white. They are no longer needed, and *A Dark Room* is a game that makes a point to give the player only what they need.

Seemingly the majority of reviews of this game – this one included – begin much like the above: with a description of its first few moments of gameplay. This frequency suggests that there is something striking about how bare and simple that first screen is – how limited the set-up and the options are. While the game does unfurl its story over time, expanding into something much more complex than a single on-screen button inviting you to light a fire, its early stages are perhaps the most easily accessible – and most easily explained – example of its appeal. The game never presents itself as a moralizing answer or a rebuttal to highly involved Triple-A titles, nor should it be considered as such. Still, in a world rich with increasingly high-resolution visuals on phones, computers, and screens of all kinds, that first moment on *A Dark Room'*s opening text is striking in its simplicity. Little wonder, then, that so many reviews begin with a summary of those first moments spent staring, somewhat stunned, at a nearly empty screen.

Yet *A Dark Room* does not abandon its core pillar of minimalism past its aesthetic implications. It also understands and embraces the impact of its simplicity on the story's gameplay. The game's stripped-down world of ASCII text and terse, concise narration necessarily leaves many events – as well as what happens between them – unexplained or unelaborated-upon. The Wanderer and the Builder's backstory is hinted at only vaguely, once the player has made significant advances into the game. The Builder's dialogue is only summarized through the Wanderer's internal narration. Feedback on purchases, actions, and other gameplay events is also sparse and disjointed. When the player at last is able to purchase their first hut, allowing others to take up residence near their cabin in the woods, the corresponding narration reads: "builder puts up a hut, out in the forest. says word will get around". No follow-up is presented until, a random amount of time later, a message appears to notify a player that someone, either a family or a lone traveler, has moved into the newly built hut. Where did the weathered townsfolk arrive from? Who was it that told them about the huts?

The game offers no real answers. It gives the player no more than what they need to move from one steppingstone in the story to the next. Everything else is left in silence, given over to imagination.

These silences – the narrative gaps that contain all that is happening in the world in between the periodic updates to the narration – are not unique to *A Dark Room*. They appear elsewhere in other games' designs. Leaving a protagonist blank, for example, allows for the player to project personality, dialogue, and other character details on them. They become an avatar for the player as they move throughout the world. Even players who do not imagine themselves specifically in the role of the protagonist still fill in the gaps with things they personally infer the character to think or feel based on what happens around them. In *A Dark Room*, the silence between its tiny excerpts of narrative serve the same purpose, inviting the player to imagine the world itself the same way they would a protagonist avatar.

Eventually, the Wanderer, having built up enough huts, villagers, and resources, will receive a compass from some traders that allows them to venture past the firelit room and

into the world outside. There, in a world represented only by ASCII symbols whose significance are at first incomprehensible, they encounter the ruins of this planet's first civilization. Shards of backstory are dug up in cities filled with silent, broken people and fields of snarling beasts. By this point in the game, the player has been familiarized with the leaps of imagination needed to answer the many questions that each new piece of narration yields: what made these bore holes? Whose broken starship was this? What does combat really look like beyond text columns on the screen? And, above all else, what *happened* here?

Any strangeness or unfamiliarity posed by the presentation of the story at this stage, however, does not preclude the narrative's broad strokes from echoing other games. A lone protagonist's encounter with a helpful outsider serving as a catalyst for an ultimately heroic quest— This is a story most players know. In between attempts to balance the resource management required in the game and forays out onto the dusty path outside the Wanderer's home, something akin to the hero's journey is free to take shape in the player's mind, filling in the silences created by the game's minimalism.

As the plot progresses, once the player has comfortably settled into their role in the story, the tone of *A Dark Room* changes. Scraps of evidence appear that suggest the Wanderer has pushed their quest too far. The Builder looks tired. She stops replying as the protagonist asks more and more of her. The half-hearted fights put up by haggard people in the cities the Wanderer explores feel less like hard-won and much-needed victories and more like brutal beat-downs as the player gains access to increasingly powerful weapons and armor. And, in three brutal sentences that form what is arguably the emotional peak of the game, the villagers who once took shelter in the Builder's huts from a harsh world are revealed to have become enslaved to the Wanderer's single-minded will.

These moments are unsettling due to the way they abruptly leverage *A Dark Room*'s silences to pit the effects of the player's actions and the intentions behind them against one another. You may have thought you were doing a good thing by building the huts, for example, or perhaps you saw it as a morally neutral but mechanically necessary part of the game. After all, to collect resources, one needs a means of production. In building those homes, however, you in fact enabled something far worse – something you never wished for or intended, and which is neither good nor neutral in any way. The Wanderer never seems to care about the pain they cause, but the player does. It would be difficult not to when you realize that the story you assumed fit so neatly between the game's written lines – that you were helping a hero – so exactly echoes the internal narrative of a person like the Wanderer, who is willing to go to any lengths for their own selfish desires. Thus, what was at first a side effect of the game's minimalist aesthetic becomes directly relevant to the unsettling emotional journey it forces the player to undergo.

A Dark Room does not ultimately moralize at the player about the gap between the game's reality and their imagination. It does not offer accusations or answers. It simply trudges onwards. This time, however, the silences between its minimalist narration are uneasy. The player is left to wonder less about the lore – most of which has been revealed

by the later stages of the game – and more about the past. *What happened here?* gives way to *How did it come to this?*, but as before, the game offers no reply.

As the narrative concludes, the Wanderer collects alien alloy from scattered bore holes, repairs a spaceship, and returns at last to the stars. It does not feel like a victory, but nothing about the game suggests it is meant to. If *A Dark Room*'s devastating embrace and use of minimalism in its story should have communicated anything to the player by now, it is that it is not the ends that matter, but the means.

Strongest Element

The simplicity at the core of *A Dark Room* strengthens its narrative even as it reduces it to the bare bones of information needed to convey a full story. The lack of elaboration on anything, from the world's backstory to the characters' thoughts and feelings, leaves a great deal of room for players to imagine whatever they wish. In this way, the entire story itself becomes a player avatar the way that silent game protagonists often do. At the same time, this self-directed imagination of the world of *A Dark Room* means that, as the game progresses, there is a disconnect between what the player imagines themselves to be doing – that is, helping the hero of the story through their quest – and what the effects of their actions are – that is, using everyone they meet in the service of their goals to the point of oppression. This disconnect then leads to the highlight of the game's narrative, which is described in further detail in the "Highlight" section of this review. By leveraging the natural approach players have to these narrative silences, *A Dark Room* takes its core pillar of minimalism one step beyond its obvious aesthetic implications, creating deeply emotional moments with only a few, gut-wrenching words.

Unsuccessful Element

Much of the impact of *A Dark Room* depends on the player having imagined and projected a morally good-to-neutral narrative onto the Wanderer's journey. A player who imagined themselves to be a villain from the start will experience less surprise and likely less emotion at the story's revelations than one who had, knowingly or not, painted themselves and the Wanderer as heroes. Along similar lines, players who do not unconsciously fill in the game's silences with their own imagination – or who do not pick up on the fragments of worldbuilding scattered throughout the game – will find a significant barrier between themselves and the gut-punch moments that are otherwise so notable. The impact of *A Dark Room* is therefore not guaranteed for any player.

Additionally, the game's narrative struggles with pacing in places. While its gameplay, particularly its resource management, remains engrossing apart from the storyline, *A Dark Room* does not stand apart from other games mechanically the same way it does narratively. Long spells of grinding for fur and other resources that are in constant short supply can lag, though periodic random events and vaguely melancholy ambient audio helps this considerably. Because the story opens up at the same time as the world does, it is the promise, by and large, of a return to the dying cities and fields outside the Wanderer's hut that holds one's attention when unique narration events are few and far between. This limits its replay value to the value the player places on returning to the

world in search of further worldbuilding and nuance. Even then, like all games whose story hinges on a foreshadowed-but-not-foreseen realization, its impact may be lessened.

Highlight

As the player progresses and the intricate web of resource management required to keep one's town productive expands, their settlement eventually will – almost by necessity – become unbalanced. One resource's production will outstrip another, draining wood, fur, or other materials faster than can be harvested. It seems, at a point, that resources cannot be gathered fast enough. A player may even grow frustrated with the scramble to accumulate enough to build what they need to explore the world beyond the Wanderer's hut. And, as with any game with resource management components, players are both allowed and encouraged to use every ounce of production power to its fullest extent. In *A Dark Room*, this means ensuring every member of every haggard, desperate family who has stumbled into your town is put automatically to work.

Eventually, amidst this frustration and fine-tuning of resource management, two sentences appear in the narration column where the game has been unfolding since the player's first moments in the firelit room: "make them work. day and night."

Another message follows: "they are slaves."

The gameplay does not force – or even pause to ask – the player to stop and consider the meaning of these few lines. In fact, it is entirely possible to miss them. Like any other piece of narration, they will continue a slow march towards the zero-opacity line somewhere near the bottom of the page, then disappear. However, for those who notice them, it is a shocking moment. More than in any other instance throughout *A Dark Room*, the dissonance between the story the player had written for themselves to fill the silences between pieces of narration and the actual events playing out in front of them hits home, all enabled by the game's minimalist design.

Critical Reception

TouchArcade – 4/5 – While the majority of the review fights to avoid spoilers for the story itself, Shaun Musgrave nevertheless works carefully back around to *A Dark Room*'s central narrative. Musgrave writers, "With so much of the game's enjoyment riding on experiencing its unpredictable story, you might wonder why you'd ever play it again," echoing concerns also expressed in this review about how much the game depends on its twists. Yet Musgrave also writes that "it establishes a nice mood, leaving you in the perfect state of mind for the bigger plot moments to have the maximum impact". [1]

Slate – N/A – Will Oremus's title for this review cuts directly to the questions that the player is left with at the end of *A Dark Room*: "The Simple, Text-Based iPhone Game That Will Make You Question Your Own Humanity". It also notes the game's limited replay value, but also highlights its "economy of design, […] simplicity of control, and […] finely honed balance between persistence and reward" which ultimately leads to "devastatingly realistic" consequences "that flow inexorably from [the player's] choices"

– even if *A Dark Room* itself does not offer branching narratives that truly let the player choose what path they want to walk [2].

The New York Times – N/A – The *New York Times*' review is more an ode to the game's atmosphere and charm than it is a standard game review. At some point, Stephen Totilo dedicates an entire paragraph to simply state, "*A Dark Room* feels like an obscure poem, one that makes you work to figure out the game. It's all understatement, blooming slowly without visual flourish or aural onslaught" [3] – an excellent summation of the experience as a whole.

Lessons

- **Lean into a game's core principles.** From the first moment *A Dark Room* is opened on someone's screen, its minimalist design is evident. Simplicity – and a near-stubborn refusal to allow the player more exposition than they need – runs through every design decision, from the ASCII landscape to the writing style. This common thread coheres the otherwise disparate aspects of the game by tying them all back to the same principle, allowing them to form a united whole.
- **Be wary of design decisions that are hit-or-miss.** While the chance of losing some players may well be worth it in exchange for the impact a story might have on those who do "get" it in some instances, it is also a risky move, and not one to be taken without proper consideration during the design and testing phases of development.
- **Move beyond the obvious implications of a decision.** It would have been possible for *A Dark Room* to present a narrative in a minimalist way that nevertheless did not hang its emotional crux on a side effect *of* that minimalism, yet it is far more striking for having done so. The game's unusually impactful story would not have been possible – or at least, would have been very different – if it has stopped at only the aesthetic implications of its core tenet of simplicity.

Summation

A Dark Room is ultimately an interesting and powerful study into how a game can leverage its core pillars beyond their obvious implications – in this case, to devastating effect. That said, this review does not touch on the differences between Doublespeak Game's browser release and Amir Rajan's iOS version, which alters the storyline slightly and offers another look at the experience if certain conditions are met throughout play. The narrative differences in these releases raise many questions about platform, purpose, and what a player should take away from *A Dark Room*. While out of scope for this analysis, they are nevertheless worthwhile to consider. If any readers' interest in *A Dark Room* has been piqued over the course of my review, I recommend they investigate both releases and fill in the silences that exist between them with conclusions of their own.

References

[1] Musgrave, S. *'A Dark Room' Review – Surprising Things Can Be Found In The Dark*, TouchArcade, June 3, 2014. [Online]. Available: https://toucharcade.com/2014/06/03/a-dark-room-review/

[2] Oremus, W. *The Simple, Text-Based iPhone Game That Will Make You Question Your Own Humanity*, Slate, May 21, 2014. [Online]. Available: https://slate.com/technology/2014/05/a-dark-room-the-cormac-mccarthy-of-text-based-iphone-games.html

[3] Totilo, S. *To a Gamer, Minimalism Is a Virtue*, The New York Times, January 20, 2015. [Online]. Available: https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/21/arts/video-games/to-a-gamer-minimalism-is-a-virtue.html