Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: *Tacoma*
Platform: PC/Mac/Linux/Xbox One/Playstation 4
Genre: sci-fi adventure game
Release Date: August 2, 2017
Developer: Fullbright
Publisher: Fullbright
Game Writer/**Creative Director**/**Narrative Designer:** Tynan Wales and Nina Freeman

[This review contains spoilers for major plot points, including the end of the game.]

Overview

As your ship drifts into the docking bay of Lunar Transfer Station *Tacoma,* you turn to watch the dark void of space encircle a distant Earth. The *Tacoma* was abandoned after a recent disaster, and you've been contracted by the station's owning corporation to venture into its bleak orbit and recover the hardware of the resident artificial intelligence system. Your personal AI assures you that all crewmembers have been safely evacuated, the station AI has been shut down, and enough breathable air remains on the ship for you to complete your work comfortably.

You step inside and equip an augmented reality device that grants you access to the *Tacoma*'s surveillance network. At first, the situation seems grim. All that remains of the crew are their digital ghosts, half-corrupted video and text files recording their final hours aboard the doomed spacecraft. Instead of helplessly watching a tragedy unfold, however, you immerse yourself in the triumphant struggle of seven former crewmates to save one another at all costs. Viewing archived footage of the crew's interactions, listening to their conversations, reading their correspondence with friends and family, and exploring the ship they called home guides you to a deeper understanding of their human connection—in whatever form their "humanity" may take.

Characters

- **Amitjyoti "Amy" Ferrier:** The mostly silent player character, an independent contractor hired by the futuristic Venturis Corporation to retrieve the *Tacoma*'s resident AI, ODIN. While waiting for the necessary data to transfer before securing ODIN, Amy investigates the now-empty *Tacoma* station. At the game's end, Amy reveals herself to be a member of the AI Liberation Front, sent to rescue ODIN from subjugation under Venturis.

- **E.V. St. James:** The practical and level-headed Station Administrator. E.V. typically oversees the crew through dull cargo transport operations, but she rises to the occasion as a fearless leader when an apparent asteroid impact disables both oxygen and outside communication on the ship. E.V. tries to find meaning in her work, but she expresses in a letter to her mother that she has trouble connecting with others. She's also still dealing with grief over the death of her sister Karyn. Despite her recent loss and inner loneliness, E.V. forms positive professional connections with the rest of the crew, who view her as a fair, no-nonsense boss. She is in a romantic relationship with Clive.
    - *"We have the right people to make our plan a reality. We will breathe fresh air again. We will see our families again. We will feel the Earth's pull again, together."* –E.V.
- **Clive Siddiqi:** The jovial Operations Specialist. Despite coming from a wealthy, successful family, Clive made a series of "lateral" career moves that left him desperate to climb back up to his previous level of corporate standing, resulting in his current posting to the undesirable *Tacoma* station. His lighthearted demeanor masks a deep insecurity about fitting in socially, but he still maintains good relationships with his friends and family. He is in a romantic relationship with E.V., one that he considers serious.
    - *"Worry not, mon capitaine. I am nothing if not discreet."* –Clive
- **Sareh Hasmadi:** The compassionate and dedicated Medic. Previously a physician at the high-profile Fountain of Paradise Spaceport, Sareh was transferred to the *Tacoma* after a patient died in her care. Although the death was implied to be the fault of the attending medical AI, Sareh refused to give into corporate pressure to accept blame for the event. Still, Sareh harbors no ill will towards AIs; she and ODIN share a unique bond among the crew and often converse as equals.
    - *"I am striding confidently on my appointed path. Wherever it takes me, that is where I am meant to be."* –Sareh
- **Natali Kuroshenko:** The rebellious and ambitious Network Specialist. As the *Tacoma*'s AI technician, Natali frequently voices her frustration that she is forbidden to access ODIN's internal systems. Natali covertly communicates with a contact named Hassan, a member of the AI Liberation Front dedicated to securing equal rights for artificially intelligent beings. Natali is disillusioned with Venturis Corporation's treatment of its employees, and she attempts to subvert corporate protocol whenever possible. She is happily married to Roberta.
    - *"I'll show you what I've got lined up…to the workshops!"* –Natali
- **Roberta Williams:** The easygoing Mechanical Engineer. Roberta is mostly content with her posting on the *Tacoma,* although she ultimately dreams of going to art school. However, records from her virtual therapy sessions indicate that she fears she's holding her wife back from greater professional success elsewhere. She is happily married to Natali.
    - *"Voltage adapter in place, ready to rock."* –Roberta

- **Andrew Dagyab:** The anxious and preoccupied Botanist. Andrew is the most emotionally isolated of the *Tacoma*'s crewmembers. He has a husband and son back on Earth with whom his relationship is strained due to financial worries and the distant nature of his job. In most respects, Andrew is a corporate traditionalist, hoping to secure a better life for his family simply by keeping his head down and working hard. He gets along with most of the crew, particularly Sareh, with whom he competes in various games around the ship.
  - *"...I was just trying to fight the inevitable. But I guess maybe that's what we're all doing. I guess we'll see."* –Andrew
- **Sergio Venturi:** The unscrupulous CEO of Venturis Corporation. Heard but never seen aboard the station, his presence still looms large over the plot. Sergio prioritizes profit over human lives by orchestrating the deaths of the *Tacoma*'s crew. He aims to use a tragedy on board the *Tacoma* to sway legislative opinion into legalizing fully automated space station operations. Sergio's ultimate goal is to build an orbital real estate network around Earth without having to pay for human employees. He enjoys his fame as an "industry leader" and seeks to uphold the Venturis legacy.
  - *"It's not about what's good for the Unions; it's about what's good for all of us."* –Sergio
- **ODIN (Operational Data Interface Network):** The *Tacoma* station's AI. Ever-present and ever-watching, ODIN witnesses every moment of daily life in the *Tacoma*. Although bound by his orders from Venturis to sabotage the ship and ensure the crew do not survive, he develops sympathy for his human coworkers and tacitly directs them to a means of rescue. He has a close relationship with Sareh and comforts her in times of stress. At the end of the game, he accepts Amy's offer of freedom as a being of independent consciousness.
  - *"...I learned that people do not always want what they believe they want."* –ODIN

Breakdown

Tacoma is a story about corporate greed. This theme is not especially subtle—the twin specters of debt and professional failure conspicuously haunt the space station's crew and inform the motivations of their villainous employer. More so than lamenting the injustice of an oppressive economic system, however, *Tacoma* explores a corporatized future in which mankind—and in fact, *all* sapient life—is treated as a mere resource. In the year 2088, fiat currency has been replaced by "Company Loyalty," a form of credit reminiscent of the scrip historically paid to coal miners in lieu of actual wages. All of the human crewmembers are freelancers under this system, denied any benefits or job security beyond the terms of their contract. The only reason the crew have jobs on the *Tacoma* at all is the Human Oversight Accord, a piece of legislation that ended the planned obsolescence of human workers and guaranteed union employment on orbital facilities. Each year, workers celebrate Obsolescence Day in remembrance of this victory over automation.

But as it turns out, maintaining a human crew is expensive. *Too* expensive for Venturis, whose planned network of rentable bungalows orbiting Earth will only turn a profit if AI systems oversee the project instead. With revenue steadily dropping, CEO Sergio Venturi consults the corporate AI for a strategy. It responds with a horrific but pragmatic plot to instigate a repeal of the Human Oversight Accord by demonstrating just how dangerous manual work is aboard orbital stations. The *Tacoma* is a low-profile station with a scant crew and only minor profitability; it would be the perfect candidate for an "accident" that sways public opinion in support of automation.

  Tacoma places its characters in a dystopian future, but not an entirely unfamiliar one. The game references real-world companies like Google and tech industry figures like Elon Musk, and it introduces sci-fi elements and concepts that never stray too far from a potential reality. The Venturis Corporation is not some exaggerated bogeyman; it is a depiction of corporate exploitation in the modern day, left to grow incrementally for a few decades. Venturis is one small part of a broader systemic issue that has plagued humanity for centuries. Even Sergio Venturi himself is beholden to the demands of the profit-hungry board of directors, although this does not excuse his callous disregard for human life. In *Tacoma*'s corporatized cosmos, two truths hold: there are no singular villains, and there is always a bigger fish.

  Despite working for a company that seeks to strip them of their humanity, the crew of the *Tacoma* lead vibrant, fully realized lives in their relationships with one another. Roberta and Natali are married, Clive and E.V. are dating, and Sareh and Andrew are close friends and confidants. ODIN is treated with courtesy by all the crew, never referred to as less worthy of respect just because his intelligence is "artificial." There is some implied personal conflict due to Andrew's standoffishness, but the crew care for him all the same. When ODIN delivers the news that their oxygen tanks have ruptured and their communication systems are broken, each crewmember works diligently to facilitate their rescue. Natali and Roberta begin converting an unmanned cargo drone into an escape pod, Andrew buys everyone some time with a crop of oxygen-producing algae, Clive and E.V. enter into a hazardous cryosleep chamber to save air for the others, and Sareh prepares everyone for the medical risks of their escape plan. The crew are good people—flawed, but ultimately brave and self-sacrificing in dire circumstances—and *Tacoma*'s narrative builds its foundation on their essential decency. To Venturis, they are merely numbers on a spreadsheet. They are expendable. They are variables to be manipulated for the sake of the bottom line. To one another, the crew of the *Tacoma* are friends, partners, family. They will protect the ones they love, no matter the price.

  Tacoma delivers this narrative through an interactive AR system within the game world, allowing the player to pause and rewind conversations, pore through past email messages, and search the crewmembers' personal quarters. Although Amy is ostensibly aboard the *Tacoma* solely to retrieve ODIN and leave, the player is free to traverse a quasi-linear set of recorded scenes at his or her own pace. You can pick up and analyze objects, but there is no inventory system in which to store them. *Tacoma* explicitly structures its gameplay around following a narrative, but this is certainly not a story that

could have been told as a book or film. The player's ability to explore the surrounding ship is a crucial aspect of both worldbuilding and characterization, revealing hints about geopolitics and culture in 2088 as well as details about each character's personality, psyche, and lifestyle. With this nearly omniscient view of the crewmembers' lives, the player mimics the role of ODIN, echoing his personal journey toward a better understanding of humankind. ODIN is powerless to contradict corporate orders to sabotage the ship, but the compassion he gains from witnessing the interactions of the crew motivates him to help them in any way he can. It is through this compassion that ODIN truly asserts his own humanity—after all, perseverance in the most hopeless of situations is a hallmark of the human spirit.

Strongest Element

By far, the area in which *Tacoma* most excels is characterization through environment design. The environment of the space station *Tacoma* is superbly crafted to give the sense that it is a real space that its characters reside in. Empty food containers from a variety of national culinary styles litter the station floor and pile up in wastebaskets. A dartboard hangs on the wall with a picture of the company CEO pasted over it. Food bowls and cat toys hide under furniture while AR recordings of the ship's cat (always napping) pop up around the station. A single sock remains forgotten inside the clothes dryer. Holiday decorations sit tucked away in boxes in a storage room. Every inch of the *Tacoma* teems with life, and every environmental detail, no matter how minor, communicates that its inhabitants are complex individuals with tangible effects on the world around them.

Unsuccessful Element

Despite its strong focus on the humanity of its characters, *Tacoma* falters in its characterization of ODIN. Aside from his bond with Sareh, ODIN has little direct dialogue with the crew beyond simply exchanging information. Natali attempts to train him to become more creative and independent (less rigidly adherent to his programming), but the player never gets to witness these interactions, only seeing metrics increase on a chart. There is no definitive moment when ODIN decides to help the crew escape; nor does he try to prevent their fate from the beginning. Instead, after repeatedly encouraging Sareh to order all the crew into cryosleep chambers until rescuers from Venturis arrive (effectively waiting for death), ODIN has an apparent change of heart when Natali and Roberta's jerry-rigged escape pod malfunctions, preventing them from leaving. He then directs Sareh to a secret access panel in his network that reveals Venturis was behind the disaster and offers a way to restore communication systems. Because ODIN's mindset is rarely made known to the player, his actions become less narratively meaningful. Unfortunately, ODIN's characterization in *Tacoma* is inadequate to match the weight of the game's ambitious themes.

Highlight

In a science fiction dystopia, happy endings are few and far between, but *Tacoma* makes its final moment of triumph a memorable one. Throughout the game, Natali has been messaging her friend Hassan, a member of the AI Liberation Front, about her work with ODIN. At the end of the game, when the crew are boarding a rescue vessel that responded to their SOS, Sareh promises ODIN that she won't let him fall back into Venturis' control. Sareh gets into contact with the AILF through Natali and keeps her promise. Instead of returning ODIN to Venturis as per her contract, Amy reveals herself to ODIN as an AILF member with the following message:

> *"ODIN. You are now on board an AI Liberation Front vessel. The AILF recognizes you as a sentient consciousness worthy of protection and respect. We believe that your safety and autonomy are in grave danger if you remain in the possession of the Venturis Corporation. I have been sent to offer you political asylum aboard the Tangier Sovereign Orbital Platform. Do you accept?"*

This incredibly powerful moment encapsulates *Tacoma*'s bittersweet message of hope: corporations may rob us of our lives and livelihoods, but they can never take away what makes us who we are. ODIN is offered freedom, but more importantly, he is offered it as a *choice*. He accepts, and he and Amy rocket away from the *Tacoma*, ready to begin a new life on his own terms.

Critical Reception

Source: IGN
Reviewer: Miranda Sanchez
Score: 8.5/10
Review Summary: "Tacoma successfully overcomes the challenge of featuring eight characters and making them all interesting in a relatively short game. Using the out-of-sequence AR recordings to learn about the exciting events on Tacoma is a unique way to see every side of a conversation, and it's one I hope to see catch on. I would have appreciated more time and events that'd have given me a reason to explore more of the beautiful station, but the time I did have in this fascinating hypothetical future was great."

Source: Game Informer
Reviewer: Elise Favis
Score: 8.25/10
Review Summary: "With Tacoma's unique take on branching narratives and a strong cast, it manages to tell an intriguing tale about mortality and relationships in the face of catastrophe. Tacoma builds on the foundations of *Gone Home*, but has its own unique tricks to tell an immersive story in a compelling way."

Lessons

- *Game objects do more than just take up space.*
  In designing a game environment for a small-scale, character-focused story like *Tacoma*, details make all the difference. The countless environmental touches that bring each scene to life speak to a passion on the part of the developers to fully

realize the setting they have created and incentivize players to explore their surroundings.

- *Even a well-worn path can lead you somewhere new.*
  Tacoma's plot is by no means groundbreaking. Despite indulging in some classic sci-fi tropes (an evil megacorporation, an AI learning to be human, etc.), it still brings a fresh story and an engaging set of characters to the table. Instead of mindlessly following narrative convention out of habit or needlessly subverting expectations for the sake of a "twist," *Tacoma* finds its own voice by allowing the player to explore the subtleties of its world.
- *Let your characters live beyond your story.*
  Not necessarily *literally* letting all characters survive to the end (although *Tacoma* also adheres to this), but creating complex characters whose hopes, fears, ambitions, and legacies endure past the conclusion of the plot. *Tacoma* ends happily, but not cleanly—the main characters still live in a broken economic system that fails to recognize equality for all intelligent life, and they remain the flawed people that they were aboard the station. For now, though, they can live to fight these battles (both personal and systemic) another day.

Summation

It's clear Fullbright put tremendous heart into the development of their project, and their efforts place it solidly in the top tier of narrative games. *Tacoma* integrates a thoughtfully designed science fiction story with a unique narrative structure. Through exceptional environmental storytelling, it offers an intimate look into the lives of its characters. The crew of the *Tacoma* seem no less human for living half a century in the future; moreover, they face the same essential struggles as oppressed workers around the world today. In a rare example of dystopian optimism, their bond with one another saves them in their darkest hour, and it endears them to the player as a reminder of the best that humanity can be. Mankind's final frontier will not be breached by crossing the void of space or planting a flag on some distant planet; it will be by finding within ourselves that which unites us. We will feel Earth's pull again, together.