Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Far Cry 2
Platform: Xbox 360, Playstation 3, PC
Genre: First Person Shooter, Action, Sandbox
Release Date: 10/21/08
Developer: Ubisoft Montreal
Publisher: Ubisoft
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Pierre Rivest, Clint Hocking
Author of this review: Alexander Lifschitz

Overview

Far Cry 2, created by Ubisoft Montreal, is the sequel in name to Far Cry, the best-selling game from Crytek. The original game was a refreshing take on the dark, gritty shooters that composed a glut of the PC offerings of the time, and was successful enough to warrant multiple sequels and a feature film. Far Cry 2 sought to expand on the reputation of the original game for exotic locales and graphical prowess, and traded in the tropical setting for an aesthetic more gleefully tinged with mercenary warfare, illegal diamond trafficking, and wildebeests.

Far Cry 2 stars a protagonist – chosen from 12 at the start, though with little to no differentiation other than a sparse background dossier – thrown into the middle of a civil war in South Africa. The player is stranded in a country in turmoil as two factions – the UFLL and the APR – wage open warfare in the streets and villages. During their quest to find the elusive Jackal, a legendary arms dealer, the player is stricken with Malaria, which they must combat for the entirety of the game. The story, barring a few key twists, primarily concerns the *Heart of Darkness*-esque search for the Jackal while playing key roles in the conflict that has turned the country into a warzone.

Characters

- **The Jackal** – A legendary and enigmatic arms dealer, he is wanted by Interpol and allegedly runs a majority of the guns currently supplied to the warlords in South Africa. He appears at key points in the story, usually when he has the opportunity to kill the player character, but never seizes it. He sees himself as a mere opportunist, exchangeable for any other gun runner with the drive to do what he does, but frowns upon the warfare he profits from. At the same time, he

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wants the conflict to continue, since peace would only allow the warlords to continue their operations without the notice of the international community. We learn eventually that his intention is to help the people in the country escape to safer territories, and he enlists the player to help complete this task at the cost of both their lives. Over the course of the game, the player learns many rumors about The Jackal, such as the possibility that he has been diagnosed with cancer and has a few months to live, but none are made clear by the game's end.

- **Reuben Oluwagembi** – Reuben is a journalist. He seeks to expose the violent underbelly of the country's strife and warfare, but appears primarily to investigate the role of The Jackal in the conflict. He recruits the player to help him in this pursuit, primarily by way of gathering The Jackal's scattered audio diaries. Doing so reveals much about the nature of the beast and how the conflict – and The Jackal – came to be.

- **Prosper Kouassi and Leon Gakumba–** The leaders of the UFLL and APR respectively, Prosper Kouassi and Leon Gakumba are largely to blame for the warfare that has torn the country apart. Though the purpose and positions of their factions are never fully explained, both men are largely self-serving, and the interests of their countrymen are ancillary at best. Both are eventually killed by the player – one in an assassination mission, and one as retribution for a double-cross. They are replaced by Oliver Tambossa and Addi Mbantuwe, and later by Nick Greaves and Hector Voorhees, all of whom share the same motivations and grisly fates.

Breakdown

A major element of Far Cry 2 is the gritty realism on display over the course of the narrative – from the very beginning of the game, the presentation is unapologetic about what it sets out to show in regards to man's inhumanity to man. Let's sum this up right quick, shall we?

The player begins the game in a car ride through the combat-worn villages of Leboa Sako in South Africa, searching for the Jackal. Upon arrival in the town of Pala, we succumb to undiagnosed case of malaria and pass out. We then wake to the sight of the Jackal, who has saved us, thought he leaves just before the town goes to hell. A cease-fire falls apart and the town becomes a storm of bullets and bombs as the APR and UFLL engage in street warfare. We again pass out from a malaria fever within minutes. (Convenient plot device, huh, kids?)

The player wakes up in the camp of a faction Lieutenant, and they must begin earning their stripes. It is at this point that they must take on tasks for the UFLL and APR against each other, building a rapport with the factions and growing ever closer to the Jackal, all while assisting newly-found mercenary friends and researching the Jackal for Reuben, a local journalist.

There are a few key twists in the game from this point out, and plenty of commentary embedded in the critical path of the gameplay on human cruelty, the futility of war, opportunism, and other such themes that have been the stuff of war documentaries since we first started laying light to celluloid. Your personal path in the narrative dances around that of the Jackal, and you form and destroy countless allegiances along the way. At the game's end, you are left with plenty of room for questions and interpretation, and the game wraps up its theme of moral ambiguity quite nicely.

Now that we've summed up the plot, here's the whole ballyhoo over this title: Far Cry 2 is a controversial game in terms of what it does with immersion. It is, ultimately, an experiment in immersive narrative, perhaps in the way only a game can provide; experientially, not just observationally. In this regard, though, we see how closely the narrative can affect the game and systems design under the floorboards.

One major contention that many had with the game is the idea that it sacrifices fun for the sake of immersion. If you ask any game designer worth his salt if fun should be re-evaluated in the hierarchy of needs at any point, he is likely to start frothing at the mouth and shouting obscenities in broken, long-dead tongues. But Clint Hocking took a lot of liberties with the way Far Cry 2 came to be more of a commentary than a proper game. Quick-warps around the extensive game world are gone; instead, you need to travel around by any means you can salvage, over and over again. This wouldn't be *quite* as tedious if the game world had any lasting sense of transformation. But we must ask ourselves, is this kind of design actually assisting the immersion factor of the game?

This is where narrative becomes such a contentious issue. There are lots of examples like this in the game world; constantly hunting for medicine to stave off malaria, guns that degrade over time, copious friendly fire, etc. Sacrificing fun for the sake of realism assists narrative capability, yes, but you're still sacrificing *fun*, and the deepest circle of game development hell is reserved for designers who forget what is paramount in their field. This also begs the question, though, of whether we should treat Far Cry 2 as a proper game, or something altogether different that simply uses games as a medium.

But it's the games' technical and systems problems that ultimately break whatever immersion that the narrative has created, because while recurring maintenance mechanics assist with the realism of a game, you're making a very serious commitment to keeping everything else realistic. This is where Far Cry 2 falls flat on its face.

A whole subculture has emerged around Far Cry 2 "Permadeath Runs," where dying in the game means you agree to restart the whole thing. This affects the way you play, and supposedly turns the game into something altogether deeper than a run of the mill shooter. Some have documented their experiences with permadeath runs to hundreds of pages in length. I maintain that this style of gameplay is no more narratively significant to the player than in any other game, simply because there are so many things wrong with how the game operates that cannot be explained away with anything but the idea that you're playing a game. If I commit myself wholeheartedly to the idea that I'm a

mercenary in South Africa, and take all my precautions thusly, I cannot maintain the mindset in the face of buggy AI and respawning weapon caches.

This is where the concept of "apologetic narrative" comes in.

The plot is fine, and the writing doubly so, but Far Cry 2 takes the role of narrative to a level where it actively compensates for what I perceive to be poor systems design. It can be done well, like in *Prince of Persia*, where the transient nature of death is explained away as the Prince's faulty memory, but here, it actively attempts to explain away gameplay issues.

Far Cry 2 is a game that, on its face, was about taking sides in a conflict, and for some reason, the developer decided that friendly AI was not a priority. When you run a mission, everyone you meet outside of the central village is out to kill you, from both factions. Having supporting AI from the side you were currently working for would have been a game-changer and an incredible boon for immersion, but it didn't make the cut. How do you explain this away?

"You're on a secret mission." With every mission you take, you're given this little nugget of context to explain why the side you're working for is actively trying to sabotage you. Is it passable from a story standpoint? Possibly. Though how this really comes off, as Yahtzee so eloquently put it, is that "programming friendly AI is *hard*." Sure, the concept of each side using a deniable agent is plausible. But it's not so much that the justification is counterintuitive as it *actively works against a transformation in the game world.* The game markets itself as world where you truly feel the weight of your actions, and it just isn't. You feel the weight of the actions that have been planned for you. The only thing your choices affect is perhaps the names of the players. In context, they're interchangeable. (Bear with me; we'll get into non-linear narrative in just a moment.)

The end result hurts the gameplay, cheapens the narrative, and dings the immersion of the game irreparably. This whole game is fraught with examples of apologetic narrative used as an excuse for poor design choices. Lacking AI, repetitive objectives, inconsequential choices, all explained away by the literary equivalent of Mr. Wolf from *Pulp Fiction.* It's cleaning up the crime scene with one-off lines of voiceover, and it just feels cheap. I can't be immersed when I see poorly thought-out development choices spraying me with hot lead, no matter *what* the story tries to communicate to me.

And it's a damn shame, because the rest of the story is actually quite well-done. There are some issues that could use some elucidation, mostly in regards to the nature of the conflict that plagues the world of Far Cry 2. No particular player in the world other than the Jackal feels very well fleshed-out, even the organizations you spend time working for. If a player is expected to take sides, you can't keep them in the dark. Their motivations need to be framed in an ideological counterpart, and neither the UFLL or APR are distinguished from each other over the course of the game, rendering the idea of taking sides useless. They become simple gangs of thugs, and the thugs themselves aren't exactly memorable.

The whole of the game seems to be the product of good writing and narrative design stifled by poor game and systems design. For a game that expresses so much, it seems to lack a proper means of conveyance, and the narrative is expressed *in spite* of the game itself. Say what you will about high art, but it's difficult to support what is ultimately an ancillary trait of games, like story, when the gameplay itself is so marred and broken.

It took me 3 months to beat this game. Two and a half of those months were spent on the period between when I had gotten so fed up with it that I ejected the disk, and when I decided that I needed to beat it if I were to rightly critique it. Getting past the first ten minutes once I restarted it took more willpower than I thought I had.

No game should do that. My discipline is clearly just slightly tougher than yogurt.

Strongest Element

As we said above, Far Cry 2 is ultimately an experiment in immersive narrative. Now, a narrative isn't just a set of words on a page or some witty dialogue; A narrative is any aspect of the game that informs us about the world surrounding our agent, and a successful narrative is one that so effectively conveys itself that we feel part of this universe that is, objectively, a hodgepodge of glossy textures and sculpted polygons. The game takes some controversial liberties with gameplay mechanics for the sake of realism, as was explained above, simply to communicate the depth of emotion and consequence in the world that it has presented us with. And once it ensnares the player, it turns certain concepts about branching narrative completely on its head.

There are issues with the efficacy of certain choices made by the player (which we will get to), but it successfully sidesteps the issue of a binary morality system that we see in branching narratives with unhealthy regularity these days. One very effective method that Ubisoft titles have used in a number of recent games, such as in *Splinter Cell: Double Agent*, is a philosophical framing for moral choices. Where other games will use what has become "the Jesus/Hitler Approach" in common parlance – a choice between two moral extremes with clear-cut distinction – for moral choices, Far Cry 2 instead poses a question of allegiance to the player. While the choices in the game certainly don't mean that much from a gameplay reward standpoint, using philosophical quandaries such as the idea of a greater good and the earning of the trust creates a deeper emotional choice for the involved player.

For instance, one particularly effective use of this is when it becomes clear that an assault is to be carried out on a nearby church and Mike's Bar (the mercenary haven in Leboa Sako) at the same time by the faction that has recently betrayed you. If you go to Mike's Bar, you arrive just in time to be slain along with your comrades by the endless waves of guerilla military, while the members of the church are left to die – a universally negative outcome. If you go to the church, though, you can ensure the escape of the civilians and priest while they leave you as a distraction, and your allies at Mike's Bar are killed by the enemy militia.

On its face, the choice seems clear. In both cases, your allies will die. But if you go to the church, you can at least guarantee the survival of the parishioners and the priest. From a narrative-agnostic standpoint, this is an easy decision to make: Head to the church and allow the escape of the civilians as you go down fighting the militia. However, at this point, every narrative quality of the game – from the story and characters to the universe at large – had cemented a bond between me and my fellow mercenaries, who had risked their lives many times to save my own. I had little connection to the members of the church, but I knew that my friends would die either way, and the least I could do is save the churchgoers. But in the world of Far Cry 2, no decision is cut and dried. It wasn't like I had to save an orphanage, or leave it to burn. I had vested interests in both sides, and though one had a quantifiably better moral *outcome,* it was the means that suddenly made both paths almost level on a moral scale. Again, asking a question of a philosophical nature: Do the ends justify the means?

Call me a selfish bastard, but I had made up my mind. I decided to go to Mike's Bar, fully aware of what was about to happen, to go down fighting with my comrades. THAT, my friends, is an immersive narrative.

And why did I care so much about my doomed allies? Because they had been endeared to me through the context of gameplay. They had been there for me when I was on the brink of death, and provided backup when the scales were tipped against me. This is more than what a narrative of phrases and witticisms and macho one-liners can convey, merely sitting atop a foundation of systems design. This is a narrative that weaves its way into gameplay. This is a story that you do not read, but you experience. Most games have you imbue your own morality into the game world; Far Cry 2 fundamentally changes the way you operate in the context of a moral environment. It changes the way you think, if only while you hold the controller.

As a parting example of how this game can affect you, let's flip this idea of gameplay-oriented endearment on its head. As you go through the game, you can assist fellow mercenaries and clients by taking on extra mission objectives, usually culminating (regrettably) in an escort mission at the objective's end. Your interest, should you accept these optional quests, lies with protecting your ally.

My first ally, who has been with me through multiple missions, took off on her objective as soon as I had completed the primary task at hand. She radioed me that she was being attacked by enemy forces at the rendezvous point, and needed my assistance. I immediately regretted accepting her mission, as I was situated in the middle of enemy encampments, and wondered aloud why she couldn't have waited to begin her failed assault until I could get closer. Call it a failure of game design, but the question was fresh in my mind.

As I grew closer and closer to the rendezvous point, I began to wonder more coherently why she couldn't have waited. I grew sick of playing this game with every pointless escort mission she beckoned for my assistance on. She radioed me again, more frantic,

pleading for my aid. I stopped running. She was an idiot. She decided to take on a deeply-entrenched group of enemy forces before I could join her. She again pleaded with me, one final time, to help her in her lapse of judgment.

Really, this was just bad game design. The optional missions were always the same, there wasn't much tangible benefit, and it began, aggravatingly, as soon as a mission was completed, leaving no time to sneak back out of an infiltration or tend to new wounds. This was a gameplay nuisance that could have been designed away with a few more weeks in production and some focus testing. Instead, this became not a problem with the game designers, but with the character.

Screw her, I though. She committed a tactical error. I cannot be held liable for that. I let the radio go silent.

I drove off into the South African sunset in a hijacked buggy, taking in the weight of what had just happened. I'd like to think my character was pensively chomping on a cigar.

I then accidentally hit a passing zebra in a rather mood-breaking and anticlimactic manner.

Unsuccessful Element

Significant moral choice, however, is often not black and white in composition. While it is true that the choices the game presents you with are framed so delicately as to elicit an emotional or philosophical response, they all fail a critical stage of choice diagnosis.

That being, the choices you make are absolutely worthless. Both from a gameplay standpoint, and a narrative one.

The concept of choices in a game is the core experience of the medium. After all, what is a game but a series of choices that the player must navigate? But if we extrapolate this system to a storytelling standpoint, a choice becomes a hallmark of the branching narrative.

I think we need to define what we look for in a non-linear storytelling system, though. There are many varieties, and what people seem to most closely associate the term with is a system in which player choice creates a divergence in the course of events that governs the game world. What we see in Far Cry 2, though, is a different kind of non-linear storytelling, similar to the *Rashomon* approach; we experience a single story thread over the course of a game, but the player choices simply create a divergence in *perspective*. We view the same events through the eyes of multiple players on the stage.

However, now that we have defined this, we see where the game fails in a branching story capacity. We have eschewn the first supplied definition, since no player choice in

the game creates a different set of circumstances at any point in the game, barring an ending that I would define as rather impotent in terms of intrigue or closure. So if we go with the second, we would need to be able to truly experience different facets of the same story in order to have the idea of player choice in the narrative apply.

This becomes impossible in the world of Far Cry 2, since the player is *forced to play every part.* Before the game's release, the creators seemed to pride themselves on the idea of being able to choose your own destiny, and take sides in the gripping world of South African warfare that they had constructed. They touted their morally ambiguous sides in the conflict that the player is thrust into.

But there's really no point in making morally ambiguous sides if the player has to experience all of them. You can't take sides if doing so leads to the inability to progress in the game. The player is forced to complete all objectives for both the UFLL and the APR before any major story event will occur, and while that's a fantastic way to express your universe in a single playthrough, the ability for players to immerse themselves in a universe by taking on an adversarial mindset is completely destroyed.

This defeats the purpose of creating an apologetic narrative. The point is to explain away the faults in game and system design without hurting immersion, but there are things that even a good story can't explain. Far Cry 2 is a game that doesn't want you to play the game your way; it wants you to play it *optimally.* What's the point of rationalizing and characterizing the sides of a conflict when you can't choose between them to any significant degree? Probably the same reason I can spend forty uncut diamonds on a stealth suit and still have enemy AI spot me crouching at night in a field of tall grass from one hundred meters away. There is no sense of lasting personal presence in the world, and trying to keep that appearance up over a lack of substance is a dangerous game to play. Far Cry 2 provides the illusion of choice in both story and gameplay. It wants to be played, and god dammit, it seems to say, *you will play it my way.*

Highlight

Far Cry 2, if you can see past the gameplay issues, creates a lot of memorable moments by virtue of emergent narrative, such as the examples provided above. There are some tightly-orchestrated events that carry their own weight, but none quite as memorable as the showdown in the last hours of the game.

From the very beginning, you can help fellow mercenaries with optional objectives, and they'll help you by rescuing you when you are felled by enemy fire or getting your back in firefights. This functional implementation of the characters can create a kind of camaraderie with them, which is made all the more painful when your allies are presumed dead after the assault on Mike's Bar. As we pointed out, you can even go down fighting with them.

In the last hours of the game, you're tasked with getting a suitcase full of diamonds to help bribe the border guards to let refugees out of the country. When you go to the drop point for the diamonds, the area is eerily quiet.

It's not hard to see what happens next.

As soon as you grab the diamonds, you're ambushed by your fellow mercenaries, who were presumed dead, and left to fight with them over the diamonds.

One of the thematic elements of the game is the idea that "nobody is immune to the disease." People are vulnerable to their environment, and after some time, they fall influence to the world around them. Your malaria serves as a kind of literal parallel to this idea, and The Jackal waxes philosophical about the nature of man at any given point, but now you're forced to stare down the consequence of exposure as you gun down your former allies. "There's no safe seat at the feast", so it seems.

Now, when one of your allies falls during normal combat, you can heal them with a syringe full of narcotics, or, if you have none, finish them off and spare them the indignity of dying slowly. The same happens here.

Once you've taken out all of your former allies, you get the privilege of going up to each one of them, lying on top of them, and hearing them thank you as you cock your gun, put it under their chin, look away, and pull the trigger.

Boom.

Oh, goody.

Critical Reception

Far Cry 2 generally received positive reviews when it was released, with a rough average of 85/100 aggregated on Metacritic at the time of this writing. As expected, many found the game's strength to be the atmosphere and rich world it had constructed. Ure Paul at Actiontrip remarked that "The first few hours of Far Cry 2 were unlike anything I've experienced in a first-person shooter. Sure, the GTA inspired gameplay involves plenty of driving and consulting the GPS for main tasks and side-missions. But it all felt amazingly real. Completing each task is really hard work." A majority of these reviews felt as if they had a definite transformative effect on the game world, which I was personally surprised at.

Brad Shoemaker of Giant Bomb was one of the few reviewers to comment on the nature of player choice: "You can take on missions from both groups in any order, which gives the story a playing-both-sides-against-the-middle sort of feel. The outcome is generally the same regardless of which missions you do when, though. There are a few seemingly

dramatic decisions required of you at key points in the story, but the effects of only one of those choices seemed truly meaningful to me after the fact. Still, the high points of the plot felt appropriately gritty and intense as they came." In the same review, he called many of the game characters "felt interchangeable to me due to their uniformly flat, dull voiceovers, but their collective presence enlivened the game world all the same." His review was enthusiastic overall, with 4 out of 5 stars awarded to the title for "the weapons variety, stunning visuals, and originality of the story and setting."

Brad Nicholson at Destructoid mentioned the use of restrictions as an immersive tool, such as how the lack of HUD and handheld mini-map "takes some getting used to, but works well and is an insanely immersive tool." His overall impression of the game was that "it has a great presentation, good shooting mechanics, decent AI, a long single player experience, impactful choices, an enormous multiplayer component, and some of the more memorable injury scenes ever witnessed in a videogame." His objections were "the redundancy of some missions, the sparsely populated world, and awkward saving system that can often throw players miles away from objectives with nothing but a long, pointless drive to look forward to." Overall, though, he gave the game an 8 out of 10.

Consensus was that the game achieved a deep sense of immersion, but a sense that was coupled with a few inconvenient gameplay pitfalls. Many found a substitute for the lost fun factor with the sense of wonderment and involvement that the game provides. I personally found it too much of a hassle to justify the immersion factor, but it only goes to show you how polarizing this game can be.

User reviews seem to reflect my own sentiments about the game more fervently (and with far more flowery language). On Metacritic, the user score is 7.4, mostly from a mixture of low (2-4) and high (7-9) reviews, with little in between. GameFAQs shows a Gameranking score of 8.4, with a user review score of 6.4 – so it would seem that the vox populi is a little more fervent in its judgment of the game.

One of the sayings I live by is that you're doing something wrong if you're not pissing off the right people. Perhaps Far Cry 2 is doing something right.

Lessons

Gather 'round the fire, children. Time to see what embers waft off of Far Cry 2's burning carcass.

- A game's narrative is only as strong as the game that underlies it. We're not talking about lines and VO, but the entirety of the narrative – the environment, the universe, the ability to move a story in any direction. If you set out principally to make a game that conveys a world, with fun factor as an afterthought, you should really think about why you're trying to use games as a medium. If you set out to design an experience, you need to make sure that the whole package is enjoyable. Evan Skolnick will scold you if you don't.

- Using story to explain strange aspects of your universe comes with being a good narrative designer. But if you use story as a way of justifying or explaining poor gameplay, you only cheapen your narrative. Story is something you use to *enhance* a game. It's a crutch that your game can rely on during hard times, true, but it should not act as an enabler. (See: parents.)
- Every action has an equal and opposite reaction, and Newton's second law makes it all too easy to fabricate shallow choices in games. There's a reason that certain arguments have been the stuff of philosophical textbooks for thousands of years: there are no right answers. If you want to tread the gray areas of artificial morality, using the framework of non-binary arguments and dilemmas can be a great way of provoking thought on top of your delicious shoot-'em-up action.
- A game can tout a branching narrative as a primary feature of the experience, but it's not the same as affecting the game world. You cannot confuse the two; The former can be a simple matter of differing perspectives, while the latter will change the actual events of the game world to a significant degree. In either case, you need to make sure that each allows the player to actually live out their choices to the bitter end. If you want them to see everything, build a universe that warrants more than a single playthrough.

Summation

There are certain truths in life and design that are easy to forget. You cannot force a dynamic narrative through a linear path, creating fun is the ultimate goal of a game designer, no sex in the champagne room, etc. Far Cry 2, then, is a game that defines itself by straying from absolutes. It's an audacious game, and though I personally didn't enjoy the experience, I will admit that it is a game that deserves to be played. A lot has been said of games being counterproductive, but Far Cry 2 ultimately succeeds in going rogue one last time: If you have any interest in game or narrative design, you will walk away from it a better person.