

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Depict1

Platform: PC

Genre: Puzzle Platformer

Release Date: August 19, 2010

Developer: Miroslav Malesevic

Publisher: Bored.com (Sponsor)

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Kyle Pulver

Overview

I will be reviewing “Depict1” designed by Kyle Pulver and remade on Flash by Miroslav Malesevic. It is a side-scrolling platformer game which puts the player in control of a silent purple hooded protagonist who is stuck in a bizarre world. The story is told via a shadowed figure “narrator” who converses with the protagonist in his journey and “guides” him along his journey to escape. However, the instructions and statements provided by the narrator are lies which hinders the protagonist progress more than aiding him should he follow. The visuals are done using a retro-pixel style and have a twist

of their own. As with the narrator, the objects found do not follow conventions usually seen in games. For example, green shiny diamonds that look like collectables are actually spikes that “kill” the player while the spikes are actually collectable daggers that the protagonist can use to throw. The theme of “Don't trust the Game” can be seen across the game and is skillfully integrated into both the narrative and gameplay. The story exposition of “orthodox versus innovative” is mixed intricately with the game and adds interactivity to story telling as the audience decipher the true hidden meaning. In addition, narrative tools are also well used and presented to provide a smooth game experience while preserving the message it is trying to convey to the audience.

Characters

- **Purple Robe Protagonist** – The player avatar. The gender and face of the character is ambiguous due to the hood from the purple magician robe he/she is wearing. This allows for the player to put themselves in the shoes of the avatar. There is not much defined due to this reason other than the fact that the hood is covering the eyes. There is also a dark circle aura surrounding the protagonist. More will be explained in the breakdown in the later section. For ease of writing, I will refer to the avatar from my perspective using the masculine reference.
- **Shadowy Narrator** – The antagonist of the game. He appears in a classic text dialog picture box on the top of the screen. His initial appearance is a silhouette of a person presumably wearing an office attire due to the hint of a tie. But he is in fact a dark creature with only one eye – a cyclops. He is unable to affect the world in which the player avatar is in and is confined to the dialog box for the entire duration of the game. He lies to the player which indirectly hinders the player's progress should they follow his words.

- **Shadow Lemmings** – The “moving spike” obstacles of the game. They take the shape of lemmings in the real world but with a coat of black and gray stripes coupled with “glowing” blue eyes. A white aura surrounds each of them and they come in two variations. One walks back and forth on the ground while the other hovers up and down in the air. They “kill” the player should they touch him. However, they too can be killed if a brick falls on them.
- **Protagonist Dark Self** – The doppelganger of the player. He appears in the last level confronting the player with what seem to be an impossible puzzle. He looks exactly like the player apart from the opposite colors and differs by having dark flames emitted off him. He also has a white aura around him, opposite to the player's black aura, and mirrors every move the player makes.

Breakdown

- Story Breakdown (3 Act Structure)

In my analysis of the game, I will be doing something unorthodox by telling the “game story” but naming the player “Creativity” and the shadowy narrator “Convention”. By changing the names of the characters, the symbolic meaning of the game becomes clearer.

Setup : “The Narrator is Deceptive”

The story starts off with Creativity in the dark. The only thing he can see is the dialog box at the top of the screen with Convention. Convention tells creativity that he is being hunted and to listen to him in order to survive, which is a lie. Convention then tells Creativity incorrect controls, which are in fact common schemes found in other games, along with wrong information of how things work. An example is the green gems seen in the game, which

Convention says can be collected but in fact kills Creativity. Another is the spikes which are actually usable throwing knives that can be used to create platforms on walls or break objects. Along the way, Creativity meets the shadow lemmings. Convention says that they are trapped while we are free, an obvious statement at the moment. Convention then lies, telling him to jump on the shadow lemming to kill it, which references other games such as Mario stepping on enemies. This does not work but kills Creativity. After much trial and error, Creativity will reach the end of the game according to Convention. He then instructs Creativity to quit. Creativity is able to find a hidden path that leads to more levels ahead however Convention mentions that he will not “aid” anymore and leaves.

Confrontation : “The Game, itself, is Deceptive”

Creativity finds many interesting new puzzles which utilizes what he has already discovered. That is up until the point where the level itself is invisible and the game shows incorrect layouts of the level. At this point, Convention appears and tries to talk Creativity into quitting, telling him that it will get harder as he progress. Creativity refuses to give in and crosses increasing difficulty of puzzles. Eventually, Creativity revisits what appears to be the first level but getting into the light (the bad ending goal) loops back to the same level endlessly. Convention creates false hope but there is absolutely no way to break the loop. Since there is no way out, Creativity can only spend the time and wait till something happens, which does as the light dissipates and opens up a new hidden path.

Resolution : “Deception is all in the mind”

Creativity finds himself at the boundary between the familiar world and a dark unseen one. Creativity will get to an area where there is a pit in the center and the layout is mirrored about the pit. At that time, Creativity's dark self jumps out to the opposite location. Convention then

comes back and taunts Creativity, telling him that this is a perfect setup and there is no way out but to stay there for eternity. Conventions also mentions that he is part of Creativity. Creativity thus innovates and finds a method which his dark self is unable to mimic. That will lead to the dark self's downfall using the pikes in the center. When the doppelganger is destroyed, the screen cracks and shatters. After everything clears, Creativity finds himself in a clear world and the true goal which leads to the end.

- Symbol Analysis

- **White Aura** – The color white symbolizes purity. As an aura that surrounds the subject, it means the subject is pure. Also, as the aura “illuminates” like a light it means that the vision of the subject is pure and true. It is found on the lemmings and the dark self which suggests they are pure beings and they know the truth.
- **Black Aura** – The color black symbolizes mystery. Similar but opposite of the white aura. The protagonist character is the only one with this. It shows that as players/people we are tainted by a multitude of factors such as instincts, conventions, upbringing, knowledge etc. and are not pure in nature. Because of that, our vision is clouded and we are seeking the truth in life. This is further emphasized by the hood covering the eyes which obscures vision.
- **Purple Robe** – This is the clothing worn by the protagonist character. The color purple symbolizes enlightenment. A person donning an acolyte robe symbolizes that he/she is a follower. Together, they suggest the player is a follower of enlightenment or an adept

seeking enlightenment. In this case, enlightenment is in the form of breaking free from conventions which limits our creativity.

- **Lemmings** – These creatures have a migratory behavior in real life which cause them to disperse in all directions. In the process, a large number of them do not survive the ordeal and thus gave a misconception of lemmings being suicidal. They are a great symbol for “ideas”, due to their fragility and nature to explore. Falling bricks in the game crush them without consequence to the protagonist. However, it “kills” the protagonist should they collide. Since the protagonist represents Creativity, and thus indirectly “ideas”, destroying lemmings would be the same as killing himself.
- **Dark Self** – As a negative doppelganger, it encompasses all the opposite “forces” that goes against the protagonist. Since the player is a metaphorical representation of creativity, the dark self can symbolize anything that hinders creativity such as doubt or conventions.
- **Shadow Narrator** – As with the breakdown, it can be understood as a metaphor to “Conventions” but a better designation will be “Logic”. As with conventions, it reasons and tries to keep the player safe but in doing so sets limits on anything that can be done. Conventions are part of our logical self and we find comfort in them as we do in things we understand. To back it up, he is a cyclops which deceivingly symbolize higher consciousness due to the location of the single eye at the pineal area of the forehead. Man also represents reason and the mind, the opposite of woman's emotion and soul.

- **Pillar of Light (Goal)** – Light symbolizes revelation and it is appropriate as a goal which lifts the player up to the next level. It corresponds to symbolic mythical directions; ie. “North” is the place of wisdom in accordance with native American symbolic directional “powers”. It shows the player's gain in wisdom and experience from clearing the puzzle, which makes up the journey.
- **Knife** – The knife is a tool and ceremonial tool used in many rituals. It is suggestive that the player is in his rite of passage ceremony. The goal then is to transform from an initiate to an adept after gaining enlightenment.
- **Background Spinning Squares** – A square and its four corners symbolizes the four common phases of human life (birth, child, adult, death). The square moves when the player moves and is idle when the player does not move. It reflects how things work in the cycle, an action causing a reaction which leads to other consequences. If nothing is done then nothing happens.
- Other Moments and their Purpose/Meaning
 - **Depict1**
The title of the game is “Depict One” which means “to portray oneself”.
 - **They(the lemmings) are trapped forever, while we are free!**
As with the theme of the game, we need to understand this metaphorically to get the true message. Our imagination and ideas are the ones that are free to roam while we are trapped within our own perception of reality.

- **Screen Warping**

Screen warping is first discovered by defying “Convention” and leads to entirely new creative approaches of clearing the levels thereafter. It shows the realization of new “truths” about the actual world.

- **Invisible Environment**

These levels appear after “Convention” leaves and “Creativity” is left alone to explore. The visual level does not match with the invisible platforms which poses many challenges to proceed. Apart from being difficult and discomfoting to decipher the layout, it shows that the further we break apart from conventions the harder it is to see the path(truth).

- **Eyes Opening before the Finale**

A row of eyes open up as you walk by them before the confrontation with the dark self. The eyes opening symbolize vision clearing and being able to see from new perspectives. In the game it can possibly represent the truths unraveled across the journey.

- **Screen Cracking at the Finale**

It shows that we have achieved enlightenment and thus broken free of the conventions binding us. By shattering our perceived reality can we see that there are other views and “truths” out there beyond what we know.

Strongest Element

The best narrative element of the game is plot. Provided by the shadowy narrator, it is purely built around deception. Since almost everything told is a lie, the protagonist will need to unravel the truth on

his/her own and unable to take things for granted. Nobody likes to be lied to and it suggests there is something hidden thus the reason to lie. The clever use of this device makes the story compelling and motivates the protagonist to uncover the truth, a behavior desired in our human nature.

Unsuccessful Element

The worst narrative element on the other hand is setting, which is not bad but pales in comparison with the other elements. There are no explanations I found for the general design of the environment other than visual aesthetics and graphic appeal which could have been better.

Highlight

The finale with the Shadow Narrator and Dark Self puzzle. Game-wise, it makes the player think out of the box and the solution is not easy to see. For most players, I would expect a few trial and error attempts to figure out how to solve it. It also encompasses all the lessons in practice. For the game narrative, it is also a huge revelation to discover that while we want to break conventions, it is part of us. Like why the color red or sharp points on a triangle attracts attention, these are conventions that keep us safe. An example of this will be traffic signs, to change their shape or color might cause people to not notice them and be hazardous to our well-being. This is in our nature and shows that convention is not a villain to condemn. The conflict is also apparent in the puzzle as the only “visible” way out is for both to suicide, an act which the Shadow Narrator is trying to avoid by trapping everyone and telling them to stay for eternity. A definite thought-provoking moment for those who can see it right before the resolution to the game.

Critical Reception

While there are no “big” articles or reviews written for *Depict1*, those found are overall pleased with the game and recommending others to try it. For example, JayIsGame review by Joye concluded with

“Depict1 is among that elite group of puzzle/platform games that I would recommend to fans of one genre who are wary of the other. For people who love the hybrid, it's not to be missed.” with a voting score of 4.6/5.0 from the public. Another is on Edge-Online, by Chris Dolan, who wrote a deceptive final statement using the game's narrative device that “I urge you not to play it” conflicting with his great review of the game. The public also has provided good feedback in the comments and voting systems present in hosting sites of the game. It obtained 4 and a half stars out of 5 on Newgrounds with 900,000+ views and 4+ out of 5 score on Kongregate with 30k+ ratings.

Lessons

As with all good games, there are lessons that can be learned from it. For Depict1, here are the various things I learned:

- Dare to explore – We will not know if we do not try

Depict1 practically depends on this for the game to proceed and is prominent across the entire game. From the misleading dialogs to the deceiving visuals, nothing can be accomplished should we follow their “guidance”. By taking the initiative to explore and figure things out, be it searching for controls to move or even the hidden paths laid out to solve the puzzles etc, we are expanding our knowledge that will provide a means to progress in the game. Nothing happens if nothing is done, which the backdrop reflects by also moving when the player moves and stops when the player stops.

- Keep moving forward – Never give up

The game, itself, is deceptive. In the middle part of the game, the shadowy narrator says that it is the end of the game and there is nothing more but to press ESC to exit. That is a lie. There is a secret path that will progress the game to the next level. This seemingly simple scene poses

the choice of “Ending the game” or “Continuing”. The easy way out will be to simply end it and press escape only to find an insult achievement greeting upon doing so. Same with life, taking the easy way out is never a good choice when we know more can be done. Further on the game also prods the player, with the shadowy narrator saying that “things will get way harder as it progresses” and “give up”. Again the same message is conveyed along with the hard truth that things always get harder but we have to persevere and keep on going to reach the true end.

- Patience is virtue – Enlightenment takes time

On one of the levels there was a time limit. The clock will be ticking down while the shadowy narrator yells to finish the level faster before its too late. The “enemy lemmings” blocking the way makes life difficult to achieve that feat and hurry will most likely result in the player's demise. But why are we rushing? Because a clock and someone is telling us so? Slow down and clear the level. We'll notice that the clock can go into the negative region with no indication of the end of the world! As with life, sometimes it is better to do things right than rush it out haphazardly even with looming deadlines and people pressuring. Another example would be the “pillar of light/fake goal” obstacle late in the game. The protagonist is stuck in that level and the “goal” loops itself back to the same level. Nothing much is said by the shadowy narrator other than there must be another way out, for which there is none. Although if the player waits, the light will dissipate and then the player can carry on with his journey. Enlightenment does not always come in a snap when we want it to and spending time is the only way to gain it.

- Overcome thyself – Conventions and perception are barriers of the mind

This lesson is visible throughout the game and clearly shown in the true finale. We shape our own reality and understanding based on our experience in life. In that process we come across various conventions and familiarity with certain “standards” we come to expect. These are

shown to be barriers in the game. Spikes that looks like collectable gems, collectable daggers that looks like deadly spikes, instant kill pit-holes that are portals to the top of the game screen etc. These deceptions break the conventions and forces the player to rethink on what each object actually is. We have grown too used to such conventions and unknowingly are restricted by its presence in our minds, limiting our creativity on what things actually can do. Only by breaking free of these convention “comforts” can we innovate and find new ways to do things that cannot have been achieved before. The final level tests the player in this aspect with the “mirrored dark-self”. That scene depicts an impossible task in which the player is stuck with a mirroring doppelganger and a death pit in the center and all the player seem to be able to do is die together with it. But if the player thinks out of the box, one will be able to find a solution by saving up a knife before the encounter and breaking the symmetry as the clone does not possess it. It is also symbolic as the resolution is to overcome one's own “dark self”.

Summation

Depict1 is a unique game that challenges conventions. It does a great job of showing the illusions of our perceived reality and there are more options to be explored. In that sense, the game contains many useful lessons that helps the player grow in a positive manner. These lessons present themselves in a very subtle yet elegant manner via the game dialog and symbols which keeps the immersion and game flow going. It is a great game that I will definitely recommend to others.