Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Transistor
Platform: PC/PS4/iOS/Microsoft Windows/Linux/Macintosh Operating Systems
Genre: Action RPG
Release Date: May 20, 2014
Developer: Supergiant Games
Publisher: Supergiant Games
Game Writer/**Creative Director**/**Narrative Designer:** Greg Kasavin, Amir Rao

Overview

     Transistor takes place in the sci-fi fantasy city of Cloudbank. The story begins right after your player; Red, a prominent singer at the time, is attacked by a group called the Camerata. Their plans are compromised when an unnamed man takes the fatal blow in her place. They are then teleported away from the Camerata, to another section of the city where Red now finds herself robbed of her voice and in possession of the weapon called the Transistor, speaking in the voice of the slain. The two of you must now track down the Camerata, survive the malevolent robotic intelligences that now plague the city, find the cause of it all, and somehow take back what was stolen from you, while discovering more about the Transistor and the city's history along the way.

     Transistor takes you on a journey through someone else's memory lane that has been tampered with and tainted. You feel both a longing to know the past as it is described to you and a desire to return to it. Upon realizing that the city's restoration will not completely fulfill this task however, *Transistor* turns from a Mystery and Quest driven story, into a poetically beautiful tragedy that will leave you feeling bittersweet.

Characters

- **Red** – The player avatar; she is a famous singer in the city of Cloudbank. After being attacked by a group called the Camerata, she is saved by a man; later revealed as her lover, whose soul is then transferred into the weapon that was supposed to have ended her life, the Transistor. She finds that it allows him to communicate with her and together they explore the city littered with malevolent robotic intelligences known as the Process. Red ignores his advice to escape the city and instead heads into the heart of it all to find answers and closure. From the beginning to end, Red is driven by the resolve to settle her business with the group that caused the death of her lover and the loss of her voice.

- **Unknown (The Boxer)** – The voice and soul of Red's lover that is trapped inside of the Transistor. He serves as both game narrator and companion to Red, throughout the game. He constantly worries about her well-being and being separated from her. In the end, he only wants the best for her.

- **The Camerata** – The group that is behind the attack that mistakenly kills the Unknown man and takes away Red's voice. They are the reason the city of Cloudbank has succumbed to the Process, though they believed that what they were doing was of best interest to the city's progression.
    - **Sybil Reisz** – The eyes and ears of the Camerata. She is the one that finds and chooses targets for them to integrate into their plans to improve Cloudbank. This time however, she falls for Red and schemes to kill her lover instead. This succeeds but causes the Transistor to switch possession, and thus causes the Process outbreak.
    - **Royce Bracket** – The engineer behind most of Cloudbank's structural design. He is the one that suggests the use of the Process and lends their power to Grant. When the city is on its last legs however, he wants the Transistor back in order to push the Process out. When it comes down to only either him or Red being able to "repaint" the city, they fight it out.
    - **Asher Kendrell** – Grant's partner and an editor of Cloudbank's OVC, a terminal for news and updates. He communicates with Red across this server and provides backstory and reasons for the Camerata's actions. He acknowledges the misdirection, but values Grant's companionship more than solving the problems and takes his life along with Grant's.
    - **Grant Kendrell** – Asher's partner and the leader of the Camerata. He is a part of Cloudbank's administration. He truly wants the best for the city and under the consultation of Royce, begins to believe that change is what would preserve the city's beauty, embodying Camerata's creed, "When everything changes, nothing changes." Realizing the mess that was made instead, and the destruction of the city, he takes his own life.

Breakdown

Transistor is set in the beautifully modern and technological city of Cloudbank. The exterior is utopia like, with phone booth-like terminals in which residents have equal access to news, updates, and polls. Even the monsters that overrun it for most of the game, are sleek in design and oddly aesthetically pleasing. They show up as a product of a man in power trying to preserve the city's prosperity, claiming that change is what is needed in order to do so. Ironically enough, these greedy grabs at perfection end up costing him and the city he loved, everything. The setting thus works well, as it very much contrasts the rawness of the imperfect humanity found in the story.

The main plotline however, focuses on a different character. It begins with Red, who finds herself in the middle of these failed plans. Her entire life is flipped upside-down, she is literally introduced as she stands above the limp body of her savior and unable to speak. She realizes that the soul of the man that saved her, later revealed to be her lover, was transferred into the weapon left by the people who tried to kill her. The player then

follows her as she learns to deal with these abrupt events and changes. It becomes clear that even though she experiences such a great loss all at once, Red is unwavering as she doesn't hesitate to take back control and move forward. Having a mute character therefore isn't necessarily a missed opportunity for depth because in this case her actions already really speak to her personality. I would go as far as to say that it actually strengthens the appearance of her resolution as she can pursue exactly what she wants to, without an obligation to argue or contemplate her intentions.

The narration of the game comes mostly from the environment and the soul trapped inside the Transistor. Parts of the story are given in small bits, each area delving into the player's past both physically and mentally a little more. This allows you to more easily put yourself into the shoes of Red, as this information seems to speak directly to you. This combination of narration style and mute player avatar gives the player the chance to learn about the story as it treats the player avatar as if they had just lost their memory. This narration also portrays how the pair complete each other's weaknesses, one having lost their voice and the other their body, and progress through the story together. This both strengthens their relationship and gives background. Overall, having the narration come from a companion of equal level, rather than an omniscient presence, makes the game feel much more immersive and personal.

As they fight through waves of malevolent robotic intelligence, it is revealed that Red is the only one that can save the city. The Transistor that is in her possession is key, and half of the Camerata have given up on fixing the mess they created. Thus, her initial goal shifts in this realization. Upon discovering the bodies of Grant and Asher Kendrell, Red begins to look for the last Camerata member, Royce. When they meet, they form a temporary truce just so that the city may be restored. After following his instructions however, things don't work out as they were meant to and as a result, Royce attacks Red. The story has many ups and downs, betrayals, and heavy emotions. Through all of it however, your character remains determined, and only in the end does it all make sense. Red's motivations are never perfectly clear, we can only deduce from her actions what she may be thinking. When she finally is able to return to her lover's body however, it is revealed. She commits suicide with the Transistor so that her soul may be reunited with his. Though she finally conquered all the obstacles and is in possession of the object that can fix the whole mess of a city, she chooses to simply stop there. This reunion feels deserved, and having the game end where it began, shows that this is most likely what she had been yearning for all along, making the whole trip take on a whole new meaning and her resolution that much more significant. It is also at this moment that you realize why exactly Red locks the door to her apartment earlier on in the game, she knew things would never be the same and she didn't plan on going back. This is one of the best products of having a mute player avatar because the realization of this at the very end is powerful and makes you reimagine all the troubles that you went through to get here, in a different light.

While *Transistor* has really cool fighting game mechanics, the story is what stuck out to me the most. It is simplistic but engaging. And with only a few hours of gameplay and only 6 main characters, the game overall manages to work with them exceptionally well.

Transistor truly is a great example of interactive storytelling that makes for an emotional, immersive, and unique experience.

Strongest Element

It is impressive that nothing needs to be said by the player character in order for the story to come across in a powerful and engaging way. Your guiding lights are lit by small portions of information you find scattered throughout the environment and other characters' dialogue. It's like there is a surprise at every corner and in the end, it all somehow comes together. The unnamed man does not tell you outright who exactly he is for example, and the snippets of dialogue that reveal their relationship and memories along the way make you yearn for more, as well as strengthening the bond you feel with both characters over time.

Unsuccessful Element

The suicide of Grant and Asher Kendrell may have occurred in order to portray the breadth of the toll Cloudbank's destruction had on the Camerata, as a way to humanize the characters rather than demonize them. However, for characters that seemed so vital for such a big part of Cloudbank's prestige, it felt like too easy a way out. They seemed to give up too quickly in the events of the game narrative, so much so that we never get to really meet Grant, which sabotages the potential of having more engaging characters. The narrative may have benefitted from involving more of the Kendrells' contributions to the restoration of the city.

Highlight

Very little of what transpired before the game starts is explained until Red comes across Sybil. Right before you interact with her, a flashback of the moments before the start of the game pans across the screen. First the assailants are revealed and then as the Transistor moves across the screen towards Red, the unknown man slides into view and takes the blow. This is one of the best, if not the best, moments of the game because you finally find out who was involved and how it actually played out. The four people that targeted you are revealed, as well as the fact that the voice of the Transistor is of the man that saved you. This revelation sets off the tone for the rest of the game and the pieces begin to fall into place.

Another arguably best moment in the game is at the very end when Red commits suicide in order to be with the unnamed man. That moment really demonstrated the strength of their relationship. Throughout the game you only hear the unnamed man express his love for Red and it is really at this moment in the game that Red is able to show her true feelings for him. After all that she had gone through, and finally obtaining the power to be able to "paint" Cloudbank to her liking, she chose to reunite with her partner for real instead. It is remarkable to witness how easy it is for her to make that decision, even though the entire story was aiming toward the restoration of Cloudbank, she remained resolute in her own desires.

Critical Reception

IGN and Metacritic acknowledged *Transistor* for its engaging characters and story. PC Gamer however, felt that it left many unanswered questions, suggesting that the story should be continued or delved more deeply into.

IGN – 9/10
"Transistor starts in the middle of the action, and it's up to you to piece together what's happened before, and what's to come. It respects your ability to fill in the blanks, and relies on subtlety in a way that few games ever do." – Marty Sliva

Metacritic – 83%
The majority of reviews on Metacritic were positive. Overall, people enjoyed the atmosphere, enigmatic characters, and emotion stimulating story.

PC Gamer – 80%
"The story Transistor does tell is dished out in tantalizing morsels, and I had to spend some time reflecting on the ending to decide what happened. Perhaps because of that vagueness, Transistor's emotional climax didn't hit me like Bastion's did. Supergiant's games are, in that sense, mirror images—the first with shallower combat but a powerfully told story, the second with deep, tactical battles but a story that doesn't fulfill the promise of its world. Then again, that promise lives on even after the credits roll. I hope Supergiant isn't done with the world of Transistor, because there's so much more I want to know." – Wes Fenlon

Lessons

- Narration can be a greatly engaging part of the story without being omniscient
  - Having the unnamed man speak the most throughout the game even though he didn't know exactly what should or could be done, helped guide and progress the story in an unorthodox but successful way.
- Words are not necessary in order to show character
  - Actions truly speak louder than words. Though Red does not speak in the game, her will-power and priorities are obvious to us through her decisions and reactions to other characters and the environment.
- Starting in the middle is perfectly okay
  - Not having a linear narration and leaving key points in the story and motivations to be told to the player later in the game, can be fruitful. The mysteries and revelations in the *Transistor* game narrative actually push the player to want to know more.

Summation

 Transistor's narration is ultimately unique and successful, as it grows alongside the gameplay, allowing the player to unlock certain memories as they progress to different places. Nothing in the story is ever really straightforwardly given to you, rather it is expressed throughout in different forms, making the game do well on both immersive and narrative fronts. Thus, you can manage to project yourself into the protagonist's

shoes, feeling the effects of the memories embedded into the settings, the relationship with the soul trapped inside the Transistor, the desire to take back what you've lost, and finally, experiencing self-sacrifice.