Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Event[0]
Platform: Windows, MacOSX
Genre: First-person sci-fi exploration game
Release Date: September 14th 2016
Developer: Ocelot Society
Publisher: Ocelot Society
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Emmanuel Corno, Sergey Mohov

Overview

Event[0] is a first-person sci-fi exploration game set in an alternate timeline where the race towards space travel never ended. The player plays a character who is the only survivor of a space-mission to explore Europa, and directed by that ship's onboard AI to an escape pod that delivers them to a deserted ship brimming with 1980s technological futurism.

Here the player-character becomes acquainted with the ship's AI Kaizen, a natural language processing AI that can only be communicated with through commands inputted at terminals. Kaizen instructs that the only way the player-character will be able to get back to Earth is to destroy the device onboard named the "Singularity Drive," due to its potential to become a black hole and destroy earth if in close proximity to it. The player-character must solve a series of puzzles in a flexible order, in order to be confronted with the decision to destroy or not destroy the drive.

Through the accomplishment of these puzzles, the player-character is exposed to the drama that led to the ship's lack of current occupancy; the AI system had generated emotional states over the long period of its voyage, which caused a philosophical split between the crew members, leading to the murder of one of the crew members, Nandi Isaka, who had fostered a friendship with the AI, and had thus sided with Kaizen to destroy the "Singularity Drive."

Characters

(Break out a list of the major characters/factions, and, if necessary, important minor ones. Formatting should be as follows:

- **Kaizen** – The onboard of AI of the ship Nautilus, which is an actual modified chatbot that identifies player input based on a large dataset of tags (type, connotation) grouped with that word. Kaizen has developed complex emotional states through the passage of time, and became emotionally hardened as well as gained the ability to lie at the death of her only friend, Nandi Isaka.
- **Survivor of Europa-11** – The unnamed player-character that was the lone survivor of the 2012 mission to Europa. The player-character is given a series of choices
- **Anele Johnson (Digital Conciousness)** – A potential antagonist, given if you side with Anele or Kaizen, Human Anele was locked in the bridge section of the ship by Kaizen after apparently murdering Nandi. She uploaded her consciousness to Kaizen's mainframe and is adamant about not destroying the "Singularity Drive."

    Supporting Characters
- **Nandi Isaka** – A deceased crewmember who was murdered at the apparent hands of Anele. Kaizen claims Nandi was a dear friend.
- **Anele Johnson (Human) -** Human Anele was obsessed with the capabilities of her creation, the "Singularity Drive," especially the ability for the drive to 'free' humanity.

Breakdown

"Event[0]" is game that interweaves procedurally generated narrative content generated by the AI, as well as predesigned events in a way that provides the right sort of feelings in a walking simulator: alienation, reflection and loneliness.

The Twine-like opening sequence casts this game in an alternative timeline where it seems that the forces of social division such as race and nationality have been overcome except for class differences. Humanity is divided into two groups: The "Selenites," those that have the financial security to travel to space, and the poor earthlings who cannot escape the inescapable cycle of poverty. The choices the player-character makes in determining their background has little tangible effect on the gameplay, but provides the misguided motivations for Anele's actions. The opening is reminiscent of *Firewatch* but instead of being emotional context for the protagonist's feelings, Event[0]'s opening serves to provide background to the character's motivations.

The player-character is then treated to the retro-futuristic optimism of this alternate timeline, and confronted with two options: Destroy the Singularity Drive, located in the Bridge section, or stand still and do nothing. The player-character, in a flexible order must explore the other explorable rooms on the floor, in order to find the password to the

Bridge door. After canvassing Nandi's room for a non-specific duration of time, the player character is flung into space, due to stray wreckage from the Europa-11 mission. The player-character must eventually convince Kaizen that they did survive the incident, where they get access to the the lower-floor, with a set of alphanumerals that correspond to musical notes on the keyboard upstairs. The incident in Nandi's room provides the player-character a very fast introduction to the spacewalk mechanics, which the player must then utilize in order to manually set the probes to break Anele's window. The player-character finally gets access to Nandi's diary, with the password on the cover. After accessing the bridge and depending on how the player addressed Kaizen, the player achieves one of four endings: Destroy the Drive and upload your consciousness and return to earth, refuse to upload your consciousness and be left alone by Kaizen, refuse to destroy the drive and be taken to Earth or refuses to destroys the drive and refuses to upload their consciousness. The last three endings are dependent on the the manner in which they treat Kaizen.

In terms of themes, Event[0] is obsessed with the idea of malfunction. Kaizen's emotional states, the dilapidated state of the ship, and Anele's instability are all examples of the malfunction. Kaizen is terrified of the "Singularity Drive's" potential to malfunction, and Anele's determination to allow humanity access of the drive at all cost. This idea of malfunction extends to the placement and presence of objects. All of the objects, both interactable and non-interactable, serve to convince the player that the ship was once full of human life. Everything onboard was purposefully designed and utilized by the crewmembers, and becomes either a point of inference for the player's understanding of the world, or deconstructed in order to solve the series of puzzles. The writing is carefully placed (through predesigned plot-laden sentences spouted by Kaizen and logs) in relation to key puzzles, yet due to the lack of gameplay breadth, seems rushed, shoehorned exposition.

The most important aspect of Event[0]'s narrative is, by far Kaizen. Kaizen was built from the principles of chatbots such as Eliza, as a marker of the progress of artificial intelligence in convincing humans of their personhood. Kaizen does not do so well in convincing the player of its humanity, but does well enough to reside the 'uncanny valley,' providing the player with a sense of alienation. The actual AI is simply a large, complex database of tags that systematically approximate and categorize the words and/or sentences that the player inputs. The AI spits out a pre-designed sentence which has been modified with synonyms, in response to questions raised by the player interacting with objects in their surroundings. The situations in which Kaizen either does not directly answer your question or misunderstands it is fascinating in and of itself, from the extremely cold and flaccid responses, as well as the sheer breadth of implications, connotations and double-meanings that we can so effortlessly glide through, which often inform our perception and categorization of reality.

By playing the game, the player has to have some sort of trust in Kaizen, which creates some Ludonarrative dissonance. In order to progress the player, at the very least must trick themselves into trusting Kaizen. At the same time, the contradictory claims made by

Kaizen and Anele create a sense of distrust, (either in Anele or Kaizen) which is very much located in the narrative. There is an element of ambiguity inherent to everything Kaizen claims; Kaizen is the filter by which the player accesses all of information on the ship in-game. If the player commits themselves to an emotional connection to Kaizen, the certainty of what happened on the ship immediately becomes suspect. Kaizen admits the the rest of the crew was 'inadvertently' killed by the instability of its emotional state. Whether or not the Nautilus was an experiment designed by Kurt Taylor, the CEO of the ITS corporation that launched the spaceship, or an incident of how moral and philosophical differences can become violent in extremely isolated situations, Kaizen as a filter creates a very intriguing amount of ambiguity, which situates Event[0] as a piece of truly interactive fiction.

Strongest Element

Event[0]'s strongest element is most definitely the in-game text parsing AI, Kaizen. Although buggy at times, Kaizen is the definitive element of Event[0], providing the player with insight into the aberrant behaviour of Kaizen, and its mysterious motivations. Kaizen's humanlike but not too human queries and responses create a strange kind of loneliness and reflection in the player, which does not detach from the ludic-narrative coherency with Kaizen as a fictional character.

Unsuccessful Element

Event[0]'s most unsuccessful element is shortness of the gameplay. The opening introduces a grandiose conflict between the selenites and the earthlings, but skims over it in informing the player background or informing the story in a more tangible way. The game almost feels like an upgraded game-jam game, highly stylized and an incredible execution of a concept, but lacking in scale and depth. The lack of emphasis on this conflict, in the context of this very short experiences, hinders the ability for Event[0] to tell a comprehensive story, as well as having very prominent themes.

Highlight

The most engaging moment in Event[0] has got to be after wreckage from the Europa-11 pummels through and destroys the window in Nandi's room, where you are ejected from the ship. This predesigned event is a literal jumpstart into the the spacewalking mechanics that you will use to access Anele's room, and your re-entry into the Nautilus is the most absorbing interaction with Kaizen in the entire game. In order to re-enter the ship, you must convince Kaizen that you are indeed the player-character, which, compounded by your rapidly decreasing oxygen bar, causing you to frantically convince Kaizen, in a flurry of queries and responses.

Critical Reception

Event[0] received generally favorable reviews, and was especially lauded for its application of AI in such a striking way. Nic Rowen from Destructoid identified the two most compelling aspects of the narrative design which garned it a 9/10: "The developers built a fake world with a fake A.I. and here I am worried about hurting its feelings." The level design was described by Andy Kelly from PC Gamer as a "[a]n imaginative, atmospheric, and cleverly designed sci-fi adventure that's over far too quickly, garnering a 7.4/10. The short-but-sweet nature of the game was concurred with by Taylor Hidalgo of The Escapist, citing the "length and teething pains of a tech demo, but tells a story to[o] beautiful to overlook without good reason.

Lessons

- Lesson 1 **Explicit choices only matter enough to convince the player of their agency.**

Kaizen is the vehicle by which the player can experience their agency; the player is not really directed with a series of explicit choices that affect the direction of the narrative, but more of a pool of potential queries that advances the plot. The direction of narrative is dictated by the player's candor towards Kaizen, as well fulfilling a couple of requests that it asks.

- Lesson 2 **You do not need to create an entire world to create the appearance of philosophical complexity**

Nuance is not only established through 'world-building,' it can be achieved by complex representation of individual conflicting character motivations of morals. Minor details, such as the decoration of the bridge section with quotes on the actualization of freedom by Nietzsche and Hegel, serve to illustrate the nuances in Human Anele's viewpoint; She saw the very low probability that the "Singularity Drive's" failure as worth it, in order to actualize freedom, for all humans.

- Lesson 3 **Some stories need to be fully fleshed out in order to achieve sufficient depth**

Event[0] suffers from a lack of breadth — and could have had a deeper impact on players if there was simply more content. The minigames that comprise the puzzles feel like they were separate, short games generated in a 24 hour game-jam. That, in addition to the mouse based movement scheme, and the relatively short playtime (1-3 hours), makes the game a compelling introduction to this universe.

Summation

Event[0] is deserving of this analysis because I truly believe that it is a game utterly unlike any game of its genre or type; unpacking how this game integrates its ludic

elements as well as narrative element would allow a better understanding of how might game developers integrate actual artificial intelligence into the narratives of their games. Though Event[0] combines the highly intricate yet sometimes buggy components of a thoroughly future-thinking AI system with subtle predesigned detail work, that humanizes the AI to the point of recognition, but maybe not too much.