Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: *Gorogoa*
Platform: PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series X|S, iOS/Android
Genre: Puzzle/Adventure
Release Date: December 14th, 2017
Developer: Buried Signal
Publisher: Annapurna Interactive
Creator: Jason Roberts

Gorogoa
O' Sensemaking Machine

"The energy of a single thought may determine the motion of a universe." — Nikola Tesla

Overview

Employing a silent narrative, and leaping around the moments of a man's life, *Gorogoa*'s story is firmly rooted in the 20th Century, touching on themes of war, peace, and reconstruction. The protagonist spots a mythical creature weaving through buildings, and attempts to follow it. He dreams of the future, reflects on the past, and witnesses the restoration of a leveled city. Finally, he becomes one with *Gorogoa*, merging into its colorful iris, and infinitely black pupil.

Characters

The sole character of *Gorogoa*, who I will henceforth refer to as the "Protagonist," is the source of all forward motion in the game. Little is known about the Protagonist, other than his lifelong obsession with locating *Gorogoa*. At some unknown point, the Protagonist ends up in a wheelchair, then crutches, then a cane. It's difficult to tell which happens first because of the narrative's nonlinearity. Additionally, it's unclear if the injury comes from falling off a tower (in the hunt for the beast) or warfighting because so many of the scenes we witness are thoughts, memories, and fancies.

Breakdown

     Gorogoa, at first glance, doesn't appear to be a game worthy of narrative analysis. It features no written text or dialogue, no backstory, no complex social matrices, no coherent plot or structure, and no decipherable acts. The difficulty of dissecting a game like *Gorogoa* is a continuation of the uphill battle Roberts faced when designing it. Oh, how I hoped my specimen would croak out a line of dialogue! But *Gorogoa* is still speaking to us—just in a foreign tongue. In the same way that someone who is mute can be a piercing thinker, *Gorogoa* still has a lot to say even if it can't communicate with us directly. Furthermore, it can't be tied to a narrative gold standard or measured with a ruler, because, for all intents and purposes, it behaves like a fluid.

     Frames are the fundamental building block of *Gorogoa* which starts as one, unified image. Rather quickly, the screen fragments into a 2x2 grid of window-like panes. Roberts says:

> "Frames are something we deal with constantly in our lives. They go around the border of your TV or your phone and you consume almost all games and media through one of these little frames. Normally, you're training yourself to forget that the frame is there. Just burrow your mind into the image inside of the frame! Let it expand and wrap around your face… [So] what immersion means to us is forgetting that the frame is there, forgetting that this is a work created by somebody."

     One of Roberts' awkward decisions is disallowing players to physically interact with the diegetic world. One cannot open doors. One cannot push buttons. One cannot impress their will onto the world. The player can only change their perspective: juxtaposing, assimilating, and metabolizing images, which feels like bottling lightning. The world is self-driving—meaning that it comes pre-packed with every ounce of potential energy needed to generate movement and story:

> "In the final game, what causes the camera to move, and thus the wall to move, and thus the sun to turn, is the character marching through the desert. That meant the energy driving the whole system was coming from the character. That was a really great thing from a narrative and storytelling standpoint. The character's devotion was driving the clockwork of the ritual."

     Players simply connect pieces together to animate the world and this vamooses the Protagonist from one scene to the next. Roberts explains that there are "zones where all the pixels in one image have to align with the corresponding pixels in another, like tentacles reaching through a dimensional rift." Stitching panels together produces images that are visually—but not necessarily logically—continuous, reminiscent of *Samorost*. Everything has a dual nature. And humble objects become the interstices for two dimensions of meaning: "That's where truths are hidden. But they're not hidden underneath or behind ordinary things. They're

hidden *as* ordinary things." For example, train tracks double as a ladder that the Protagonist climbs. A person's face is pressed onto a coin and accepted as valid bus fare. A museum edifice morphs into a Pachinko machine of falling stones. Meteorites become the coal that cracks a glass jar.

"The scenes are like fragments of memories," says Roberts. This is the thread that weaves *Gorogoa*'s dream-like logic, which most closely exemplifies the philosophy of Idealism. The game, then, is a *mental process*. In "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," Henry Jenkins describes the importance of spatial storytelling in creating this very feeling: "The game world becomes a kind of information space, a memory palace." To create this palace, Roberts uses "a narratively impregnated mise-en-scene," which allows him to do away with the familiar storytelling tools of text and speech. (Jenkins 126-7) Roberts adds: "I love the intricacy of Islamic decoration which literally blurs the lines between text and decorations. That sort of feeds my fantasy that all architecture is full of hidden messages for the observer." Roberts also explains that "since the game contains no language" he "wanted a title that is not a word in any language." *Gorogoa* is the sound of one hand clapping; it's not irrational, but rather, transrational—beyond logic.

Roberts can forgo a traditional narrative because he understands the incessant human drive to manufacture meaning. There's "the narrative power of a single image… especially an image in isolation… [where] your mind automatically tries to narratively connect two images that are placed together." *Gorogoa*, to use an analogy, doesn't come as a fully-made gingerbread house. It provides the walls, the icing, and the colorful gumdrops, but asks you to assemble the story yourself. "If you're looking only at the normal content running horizontal, you're missing something essential. The answer lies on an invisible axis. You have to rotate your perception… to see a transverse vein of meaning."

Gorogoa also fits neatly into the puzzle-adventure genre. Mark Wolf, in his essay "Genre and the Video Game," defines adventure games as "set in a 'world' usually made up of multiple, connected rooms or screens, involving an objective which is more complex than simply catching, shooting, capturing, or escaping." (Wolf 5) It is here that *Gorogoa* truly innovates. Christian Valentin writes for *Pocket Gamer*: "In adventure game fashion, progress hinges on combining and manipulating items to continue the boy's journey, but in *Gorogoa*, those items are context and perspective."

Gorogoa might at first appear to be a series of vignettes or a stream of consciousness. Those are close, but not quite right. *Gorogoa*'s narrative structure is that of a parable:

> "I needed a kind of story that was well suited to this oblique storytelling
> approach. And that's why it's structured as a parable. A parable isn't just there for
> dramatic satisfaction, it's an act of communication… Every parable has two
> messages… the message… that you uncover by decoding it and the general lesson
> about [the] duality of meaning."

Strongest Element

While *Gorogoa* does in fact lack a traditional story, it still generates narrative beats through an unorthodox framework. Roberts has refined a mechanic where narrative is dispensed by snapping images together. The global game system is recontextualized with every local action. In the game, as in life, we advance by adopting fresh perspectives and making unlikely connections. Altering one's vantage point materially changes the world itself, causing it to morph and twist its gears.

Unsuccessful Element

Gorogoa's weakest element is forcing players to go through an exact sequence to complete a puzzle. Players often solve puzzles in their mind before solving them in the game, which creates a schism. Imagine sending an impulse down your wrist to put on a winter mitten. Except, to slip into the mitten you must first spin around, do a handstand, lay on your stomach, then extinguish a fire—and only then will the message reach your nerve endings. Sometimes, solving puzzles in *Gorogoa* feels like that.

Highlight

At one point there's a china plate with a blue flower pattern that becomes a gear. A man walking up a mountain turns the gear. When you complete the puzzle, and zoom out, the plate has shattered and it turns into a thought bubble of a man standing near a train station. Shortly after, you use drawings of fingers to change the Protagonist's thoughts, instructing him to move left, then left again. This enables the Protagonist to change scale and squeeze through a small hole. Over and over, *Gorogoa* deploys this same narratological process under its hood: First, zoom into something so closely that all context and perspective is lost. Then, zoom out and switch the context—but always keep the object in exactly the same position, to sell the trick.

Critical Reception

Gorogoa was the Winner of Debut Game at the 2018 BAFTA Game Awards. It also won Best Mobile Game and the Innovation Award at the 2018 GDC Choice Awards. The title also boasts a 97% Steam rating with almost 12,000 reviews. Sam Machkovech, writing for *arstechnica* describes *Gorogoa* as "arguably the prettiest hand-drawn, hand-illustrated video game ever made" and praises the context-dependent sound design, adding: "Roberts does a remarkable job summoning older motifs and archetypes, like the chorus of a song, which works to ground the game's visual cornucopia." Colin Campbell, writing for *Polygon*, says "Some games are power fantasies. But the fantasy that I indulge is the idea that there is an underlying meaning to everything, a hidden message or structure to the world. It's not necessarily that I believe that to be true. But I did believe it when I was a child."

Lessons

        Herman Narula, in the book *Virtual Society*, defines a metaverse as "a network of meaning and consequence that connects our world and one or more other worlds… and allows for the creation and transfer of value within and between them." (Narula 133) A metaverse, then, is a "nexus between worlds." (Narula 105) *Gorogoa* is a kind of metaverse, one that capitalizes on the human preoccupation with translation, transmutation, and semiotics. Other game designers may find similarly rich gameplay in this strange, uncharted territory.

        Gorogoa is, additionally, a critique of modern video game narratives, specifically ones featuring unfettered player agency. The maturation of games as a medium, may, counterintuitively, involve delimiting player/world interaction, to more closely mirror our everyday lives. More games could benefit from this kind of thinking.

Summation

        Gorogoa explores the intersection of spirituality, memory, and mythology. The Ordinary is transmuted into The Holy through a fluidic shift in consciousness. *Gorogoa*'s gamic "frames" synthesize with its silent narrative and genre-defying design decisions. Because *Gorogoa* mirrors life, Roberts, with each passing moment of elegant gameplay, is training his players to discover new aerial perspectives, fresh slants and angles, and more inclusive contexts, which translates into a quantifiable refinement of the mental eye. *Gorogoa* is not merely a game. It's a sensemaking machine.

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