Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: *Superliminal*
Platform: PC, MacOS, Linux, PlayStation 4, Nintendo Switch, Xbox One
Genre: 3D Surreal Puzzle
Release Date: November 12, 2019
Developer: *Pillow Castle Games*
Publisher: *Pillow Castle Games*
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Will O'Neill

Overview

'Are you filled with thoughts of self-doubt or tend to blow your problems out of proportion? Do you over-analyze very simplistic video games and their plots to the point where your peers think you're probably insane for wasting so much of your time researching it? Then our patent-pending SomnaSculpt technology, here at the Pierce Institute, is the treatment for you! Let yourself rest and relax in our state-of-the-art clinics as you undergo dream therapy sessions! Immerse yourself in various dreams that test your sense of reality and how you see the world. Overcome obstacles and challenges by using your mind! Look at the world, and yourself, in a whole new way and overcome what has been eating and hurting you on the inside. Or, maybe then you will finally understand the intricacies of that video game's narrative and let yourself finally rest!'

TERMS OF SERVICE

By signing below, you agree to comply with the following conditions:

1. The paper you are about to read is going to be incredibly well-written and gripping. The best paper you have ever laid your eyes on. Surely it is impossible that someone came up with this on their own, right?

2. Not everything is what it seems at first glance. Maybe look at it from a new perspective?

3. I sure do hope you're not reading this on a desktop or laptop. Or maybe I do! Try turning your head to the side?

4. You understand that the Pierce Institute is not liable for any potential nightmares, wet dreams, or confusing/embarrassing scenarios that you may experience when participating in the therapy sessions.

5. The Pierce Institute is also not liable for any potential crankiness or upset upon waking up, or the possibility of being unable to wake up from the dream session.

6. Upon agreement to participate in the session, the patient understands that they may experience:
   a. Laws of physics and logic being broken
   b. Diversions and lies
   c. Deep hidden fears
   d. Complete and total clarity over what was causing any potential inner turmoil
   e. Confusing perspectives, both figuratively and literally
   f. A fantastical game created by a diligent team of only six people, working off of a base that lead developer Albert Shih created as an assignment for Carnegie Mellon University.
   g. A deep and intriguing puzzle-game experience that: explores the dreams of the player, utilizing the magic that is force-perspective tricks and diversion of expectations, and a subtle yet complex narrative that teaches us that while, sure, life is going to have its problems, but if we look at it from an all-new perspective, you can find your own way to keep moving forward!
   h.
   i.
   j.

Sign Below:

X_____*GDC'S GAME NARRATIVE REVIEW*_____.

Characters

- **Player** - The main character of the narrative, is an unnamed person whom the player controls and inserts themselves into. Not much is known about the player character other than they decided to reach out to the Pierce Institute in order to utilize its SomnaSculpt dream-therapy technology. They are made for the player to project themselves onto - the character is the player, and the player is the character. Or, when looking at it from an outside perspective: the character is the projection of what the player sees themselves as in their own mind, searching for the answers to their inner turmoil.
- **Dr. Glenn Pierce** - Hello! My name is Dr. Glenn Pierce. You may know me as the lead scientist, and the only "human" character in the game, not counting the player themselves. I am a scientist who works for the Pierce Institute and is a key worker on the SomnaSculpt project. I will be in communication with you throughout the various dreams you will experience. Unfortunately, I am not able to communicate with you directly, so you may hear my voice diegetically through various different radios found in your dreams. I am one you can trust, I want you to succeed! Don't worry, I will be sure to inform you if you are ever lost in the dreamworld, or if we happen to lose track of you.
- **Standard Orientation Protocol** - Thank you for signing the Terms of Service. I am the Standard Orientation Protocol, your unbiased guide to I-LIDS, the Interactive Lucid-Induction Dream State. My female-sounding text-to-speech style of communicating was explicitly chosen in order to demonstrate that I do not care about you. I do not care about you. However, I will acknowledge your success in completing my orientation and understanding how to utilize your full consciousness and control while in a dream state. I will do everything in my power to stay on track and follow protocols. I am a disembodied voice that you will hear in the various testing rooms, so do not go looking for me.
- **Emergency Exit Protocol** - An emotionless male voice made to alert the player of any malfunc-
  Emergency Exit Protocol initiated! Please prepare to conclude your SomnaSculpt Game Narrative Review experience in 10, 9, 8…

  ERROR

  ERROR LOGGED BY GNR ORIENTATION PROTOCOL

  STANDBY FOR ANALYSIS

Wake up….wake up! You have to wake up!

Breakdown

Superliminal is not a very long or complicated game – as a matter of fact, it takes roughly two and a half hours for a casual player to complete all of the main objectives and reach the end of the story. Despite its simple story structure and gameplay, *Superliminal* isn't necessarily boring to experience as it manages to carefully pull the player into its strange world and meaningful lessons. Life is filled with difficulties, making you often feel stuck and lost, but if you look at everything from a different perspective, then you'll find the path to success. The game is split into nine different levels, each either introducing new mechanics, addressing elements of the story and theme, or both! This foundation fits within a very loose three-act structure for the game's overall narrative.

ACT ONE

Induction

After the player watches the opening cutscene (which is a video advertisement for the therapeutic procedure the character is undergoing), they are presented with a very simple screen: the controls. When the player tries to follow the controls presented to them, they find that they were not looking at an instruction scene, but were rather staring at a wall in the environment. This immediately sets the tone for the game – subvert your expectations. As the player progresses through the level, they are slowly and diegetically introduced to the core mechanics through a series of playgrounds in which they can experiment and learn. Out of all of the levels in the game, *Induction* is one that is the lightest in terms of the narrative. The developers were aware that the player would be overwhelmed by the unusual mechanics and visual effects, so they kept the content of the first level simple in order to ease the player into the experience. However, there is one key moment of this level that alludes to the story's narrative. At the end, in order to progress, the player has to break down the walls of the testing room in order to escape. This breaks the illusion of the carefully crafted facility – on the inside, it looks like a sort of hotel, but when looking at the facility from the outside, it becomes much more stark and industrial. The player's perspective of the facility has changed.

Optical

The second level, *Optical*, still acts as a sort of introduction for the player – once again presenting new mechanics, as well as various motifs that the player will encounter. This is the first instance of the player waking up to a blaring alarm clock, the time prominently stating 3:00 am. In the game world, this is the character's second dream – it is important to note that the Standard Orientation Protocol explicitly states that typical adult patients have an average of five dreams per night, with the therapy session rarely extending past that limit. Other than those few key points, this level is also fairly light on the narrative side of things. The player becomes more comfortable with the core mechanics and becomes familiar with the newly introduced character Dr. Glenn Pierce. From this point forward he will be a frequent presence, talking to the player diegetically through radios placed throughout the level. He acts as a sort of guide for the player, explaining the intricacies of the program they are participating in.

ACT TWO

Cubism

Now is when the introduction phase ends, and the main narrative push really begins. Just like the previous levels, *Cubism* continues the trend of introducing mechanics to the player and subverting expectations. However, there is one important detail: everything is slowly becoming less bound by reality. While the previous game mechanics were bending the rules, they still made sense in theory – the size of an object is relative to how it looks to you, and when an image becomes whole it becomes "real". In *Cubism* there is a plethora of dice for the player to interact with, however, they have very strange behaviors (such as the dice exploding or falling apart into pieces). As the player encounters this strange phenomenon, the Standard Orientation Protocol urges them to quickly finish and exit the level as soon as possible in order to avoid the oddities. This is the character's third dream, and it seems that things are slowly starting to fall apart.

Blackout

In gameplay, *Blackout* seems to be the odd level out. The original calm tone of the game is suddenly replaced by a more eerie vibe. Instead of introducing a new mechanic, the entire level is shrouded in darkness, making the player navigate carefully. It seems they are traversing through a literal nightmare, with red blood splattered over the floor, doors suddenly shutting, and ominous signs with phrases such as "DIE" or "MURDER" clearly written. What doesn't help is Dr. Glenn Pierce prodding at the player, poking at their thoughts of self-doubt and worthlessness. At the end of the level, the player finds a generator and turns the lights back on in the environment, only to realize that the "blood" was actually red paint, and the "DIE" was actually the word "DIET" written on soda boxes. The character's dreams are becoming more bizarre and unwieldy, almost to a concerning level.

When looking at all of the levels of the game, *Blackout* sticks out like a sore thumb. The sudden appearance of a horror-esque level is disruptive, intentionally throwing the player off. The whole intent of the tonal shift is to get the player to think. There is something going on with these dreams, something strange. They needed to be aware of it, and the only efficient way to get the player to start considering it is to shock them into thinking.

Clone

The character's fifth dream, *Clone*, turns the game even more on its head. Throughout the first four levels, one thing stayed consistent: when you picked up an object, its size will change relative to how it looked to you. If an item is far away, it becomes tiny, but if it is brought closer, it will enlarge. Now, whenever the player interacts with an object, instead of picking it up, it can duplicate. While the player is still able to manipulate the size of objects, they can also create infinite copies of an object. This new mechanic adds to the absurdism of these dreams. As the player traverses through the level, the Standard Orientation Protocol warns the player that they could potentially experience "dream overexposure", and should be wary.

Dollhouse

In the sixth dream, things begin to fall apart even more. At first, everything seems to be fairly normal, with the player encouraged to sit in a relaxation room. However, as they progress, both the Standard Orientation Protocol and Dr. Glenn Pierce allude to the fact that something is amiss. Firstly, Dr. Glenn Pierce states that the player had "dropped off of their tracking radars" and had just recently returned and was visible to the scientists again. The Standard Orientation Protocol also warns the player that they may need to utilize the Emergency Exit Protocol in order to conclude their session, a process in which they have to undergo Explosive Mental Overload in order to activate it. In this dream, the doors the player passes through act as portals, transporting the player between locations, and even shifting their size based on the dimensions of the portal they go through. This new mechanic continues to add to the craziness and unpredictability of these dreams, demonstrating how they are becoming more and more unstable.

Labyrinth

It doesn't take long for things to fall apart the moment the character wakes up in their seventh dream. Within seconds, the Emergency Exit Protocol attempts to activate but fails due to an "unknown error", with the Standard Orientation Protocol butting in and encouraging the patient to continue through with the therapy program independently, as their level of stress has significantly increased, and all of the orientation resources have been completely used up. If the previous dreams weren't already indicators that things were starting to go wrong, this dream should surely make that prevalent to the player. Unlike the previous dreams, everything is even more surreal – gravity and physics are all out of whack, making everything increasingly more disorienting. Finally, instead of ending the level in an elevator like every other stage, the player has to turn off a blaring alarm in order to progress.

ACT THREE

Whitespace

Immediately following the events in *Labyrinth*, the patient had created a dream paradox that went beyond the boundaries of the therapy program – they entered a dream that patients were forbidden. This is the SomnaSculpt Diagnostic Framework, a place beyond dreams. With no easy escape route, the patient creates a dream paradox by using the portal-door mechanic to try to enter a door through its own exit, essentially creating a paradox. This opens the patient's mind to the *Whitespace*, a location where all senses of reality are completely lost. It is no longer just a dream with strange rules, but instead a completely incomprehensible void. Navigating is difficult, as the rules in each location keep changing: shadows are doors, windows are actually blocks, platforms and walls need to be made "tangible", etc. In order to progress through *Whitespace*, the player has to look at each scenario from an entirely new perspective. They can't assume that their base knowledge of reality would help them, but instead, they have to approach each problem from a completely different direction.

Retrospect

The ninth and final dream isn't as much of a dream but is instead a recap of the patient's progress throughout all of the dreams they encountered. All of the mistakes, the

strangeness of it all, Dr. Glenn Pierce reveals to be entirely intentional. Every step of the way was pre-planned, with the patient's needs specifically in mind. Dr. Glenn Pierce describes to the player, as they traverse through all of the previous levels backward, that people sought out the institute and received these therapy sessions because they felt that they had lost their sense of control. They feel that the problem they are facing is unsolvable. If this person was able to look at this problem from a different perspective, then they are more likely to find a solution and come to understand the problem's importance. Much like the perspective mechanic first introduced in the game, the patient overcame all of the obstacles that were thrown at them because they looked at life from a new perspective. While the dream therapy itself isn't real (all of the sessions happening within the patient's mind), the lessons that they learned most certainly are. Anything and everything can be real if you believe in it!

Superliminal's plot is very simplistic and straight to the point, no bells and whistles. "Look at life from an all-new perspective – expect the unexpected – grow and adapt to the world around you. In order to solve your problems, you have to address things in a new and different way". This is addressed very literally in gameplay, with the mechanics themselves directly reflecting upon the game's message. In order for the player to solve the puzzles and progress in each dream, they have to approach the problem from a new angle. Don't have the object you need to reach the door? Look around until you are able to line up pieces of an image in order to make that object appear! Can't fit through the exit? Make your entrance into the area smaller in order to shrink yourself to the appropriate size! The gameplay and environments throughout *Superliminal* are excellent examples of the narrative being incorporated into every aspect of the gameplay, even if the game itself is basic on its surface. Funnily enough, even this reflects upon the game's message. Expect the unexpected.

Strongest Element

One of the game's strongest narrative elements are the mechanics themselves. In total, there are four different mechanics that the player has to utilize in order to solve the puzzles and progress.

Forced Perspective

The main mechanic is the one the player is first introduced to in the very first chapter of the game. When grabbing an object and dropping it, its size will change depending on the perspective of the character. The size in which they perceive the object to be is the size it'll become. This is one of the strongest and most prevalent narrative mechanics in the game. It can be looked at in a multitude of different ways

For instance, when you look at a problem in your life, it can be very easy to make it much bigger than it actually is, especially if you bring the problem close to intently inspect it. You are inflating the issue, blowing it out of proportion! If you simply just step back, then it becomes clear that the problem is smaller, it is much more insignificant than you originally thought. The gravity of the situation changes depending on how you look at it. This directly fits in with the game's main theme: in order to solve your problems, you have to address it in a new and different way. The Forced Perspective mechanic takes

this theme and uses it in a very literal sense, making the player change how they view the object they are holding in order to get it into a state where it can be used to solve the puzzle.

Projection

If the player notices a stretched-out image that is broken up by the level's geometry, they have to line all of the pieces up. Once they do, the player is able to grab the image, making it a solid object.

Cloning

When grabbing specific objects, they will duplicate themselves. However, it is not an exact duplicate of the object. Based on the perspective in which the player looks at it, the size of the cloned object will be affected. These cloned items can be returned to their original position.

Portal

A portal can be any sort of passageway, whether that be a door, a window, or a hole in the floor. Depending on the portal's size, the player themselves will grow or shrink in size in proportion to the portal.

As previously stated in the breakdown, the main mechanics that are introduced in the game are imperative to its overall narrative and structure. If you are stuck on a problem or are simply just lost, then look at the world, at your problem, from a whole new perspective. In this way, the answer will reveal itself to you.

Unsuccessful Element

One of the weaker elements of the game was Dr. Glenn Pierce himself. Introduced early in the game, the doctor is supposed to be a sort of guide to the player, an informant. He provides various snippets of information all throughout the game that hint at the true story of what the player is actually experiencing while playing along. Unlike more well-known and more well-rounded diegetic guides that can be found in similar first-person narrative puzzle games, Dr. Glenn Pierce is a rather dull character. His dialog is often stiff or repetitive, not offering much for the player other than some simple exposition or sparse humor that is not related to the plot. As one of the central characters in the game's lacking lineup, Pierce also does not show up all that often. In fact, Dr. Glenn Pierce did not become a prevalent character in the game until around halfway through the second level. In order to potentially improve upon these issues, Pierce should've been utilized way more often – let him introduce the mechanics or warn the player of the Emergency system, prepare them for what might possibly come.

Highlight

In the very last level of *Superliminal*, the player is presented with a final speech given by Dr. Glenn Pierce. This final speech is made to evoke a sense of awe in the player as they reminisce on their playthrough of the game, looking back at all of the levels and what they had accomplished. The purpose of this speech is to get the player to understand what they should be taking away from this experience, what they have learned while progressing through the therapeutic procedure.

"But, more often than not, the problem is not that the problems we face can't be solved: The problem is that we become so afraid of failure that we refuse to see our

problems from a new perspective. And so we do the same things again and again and again."

" Because you saw things from every angle, you understood them for what they really were. Because you kept moving forward, no matter how far off the path you were told you were headed, or how unexpected it became...You found your way."

Expect the unexpected. Address your problems in life from a new angle, a new perspective. Many things may seem impossible at first, but by thinking outside of the box, you are able to overcome these trials. Always keep moving forward, no matter how much you stray from the path. These lessons can, and should, be incorporated into our daily lives. Nothing is truly over, nothing is ever impossible, you just have to look at it differently.

Critical Reception

1. *GameSpot* – James O'Connor – 8/10
    a. The narration itself is very simple, with pieces of narration sprinkled throughout the game. The game's environments "beautifully communicate" also reflect the danger the patient is facing as the dreams themselves become abstract. Overall, the game is a little-on-the-nose, but this was to be expected in a game where the mechanics and problem solving need a lot of brain power. As a game itself, *Superliminal* is a wonderful puzzle experience that is full of ideas that are fully realized. It reaches for a goal and achieves it flawlessly
2. *NintendoLife* – Ollie Reynolds – 8/10
    a. *Superliminal*'s underlying message was something that resonated with the reviewer, especially at the time in which they reviewed the game (summer of 2020, in the midst of the COVID pandemic). Its underlying message was something that was most certainly needed at the time. Overall, the game itself is a breath of fresh air when compared to other games that were released following the success of *Portal* and *Portal 2*. The mind-bending mechanics offer an interesting challenge, which only improves the more you progress.

Lessons

● Lesson 1 – *Don't be afraid to be absurd, but also make sure to guide*

One of *Superliminal's* strengths is how bizarre it becomes, but also its subtlety in the way it guides the player to finding the solutions to the puzzles. To many, the absurd nature of the game and its mechanics may make its environment and level design difficult to produce. However, the developers that worked on *Superliminal* seemed to have found a way to expertly guide the player through the level. It was not with large blinking signs or arrows guiding where the player should look, but rather with subtle environmental cues. For instance, in the second level of the game, the player eventually reaches an infinite loop, walking around and around in a circle. At first, it seems like there is no escape, that they have reached a deadend. However, throughout the level the player has been traversing in a

closed-off house with a ceiling. When glancing up, they can see that the ceiling does not connect with the wall, meaning that there is something beyond what they can see. This subtle environmental storytelling informs the player of where they should go next without explicitly telling them what to do. The environments, no matter how crazy they become, are still expertly designed in a way that always benefits the player.

- Lesson 2 – *Simplicity is the key to success*

    Superliminal is not a very complicated game. The puzzles aren't that grueling, the game itself takes very little time to complete in full. The narrative's themes are partially thrown in your face, the models and design layouts of all of the locations are easy and simplistic. The mechanics, at their core, are basic and easy to understand – both conceptually and in construction. However, when all of these factors combine, they create an interesting game that grips the player and encourages them to keep playing. The mechanics draw you in, they intrigue you. Then, the simple plot grabs you and keeps moving forward. The short time frame needed to complete the game encourages the players to finish in a singular sitting. Everything combines to create something truly fascinating.

Summation

    Superliminal is not a very well-known game. Released back on November 12, 2019, this small indie game was released to very small audiences. It wasn't until 2020, when the COVID pandemic swept the world, that the game gained traction and attention. Gaming Youtubers played this new and unusual puzzle game, broadcasting it to hundreds, millions of people across the world. But this exposure was very short lived, the excitement over the game quickly dying out after it was released on the Nintendo Switch on July 7th, 2020. Often seen as "yet another one of those *Portal* clones", *Superliminal* is an incredibly creative game that messes with your mind. I first encountered the game back when it was released, when my favorite Youtuber Call Me Kevin made a series of different videos of him playing the game. The way he struggled, and how the mechanics kept messing with him, absolutely fascinated me. When playing the game myself, I realized that there was so much more to it than people realize. While the narrative writing may be a bit bland and straight forward in its execution (with the main lesson being spelled out for the player at the end, for example), the story itself is still impactful. Every element, every piece of this game, was carefully crafted to work together and create a one-of-a-kind experience that you don't often see on the video game market nowadays. *Superliminal* may not be a perfect video game, but it most definitely is one of the most influential and important indie games released in the past five years.

Sources:

1. O'Connor, James. "Superliminal Review - We Need to Go Deeper." *GameSpot*, GameSpot, 28 July 2020, https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/superliminal-review-we-need-to-go-deeper/1900-6417507/.
2. Reynolds, Ollie. "Review: Superliminal - a Mind-Bending Visual Puzzler with a Powerful Message." *Nintendo Life*, Nintendo Life, 7 July 2020, https://www.nintendolife.com/reviews/switch-eshop/superliminal.