

# Game Narrative Review

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**Month/Year you submitted this review:** December 2023

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**Game Title:** *Stray*

**Platform:** PlayStation, PlayStation 5, Windows, Xbox One, Xbox Series X/S, macOS

**Genre:** Adventure, 3D Platformer, Puzzle game

**Release Date:** PS4, PS5, Windows - 19 July 2022; Xbox One, Series X/S - 10 August 2023; macOS - 5 December 2023

**Developer:** BlueTwelve Studio

**Publisher:** Annapurna Interactive

**Game Creators/Directors:** Colas Koola, Vivien Mermet-Guyenet

**Game Writers:** Steven Lerner

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## Overview

**“Lost, alone, and separated from family, a stray cat must untangle an ancient mystery to escape a long-forgotten city.” - Official Summary**

In a dystopian future, scarily close to our own, human society has fallen. Attempting to escape the calamity of this futuristic earth, humans create underground walled cities that can be closed off from the world. After a plague sweeps through the enclosed “safe-haven,” Walled City 99, the only trace of humans left behind are their buildings, technology, and robots known as “Companions” who have grown self-aware in their creators’ absence. The Companions have now built their own society among the ruins of the eternally locked city, but, like their predecessors, are trapped underground. Although unable to age, a new threat to the robots lurks within the city. An infestation of Zurks, manmade trash-eating bacteria, has evolved to devour organic and robotic life. Even further within the city’s structure, a deeply ingrained oppressive class system holds these companions frozen in the time of humanity. This is where a cat, who has fallen into a chasm of these ruins—becoming separated from its fellow strays on the outskirts of the city—must navigate the city’s systems to escape and return to the surface.

*Stray* is a third-person sci-fi adventure game where the player controls a stray cat to navigate the ruins of a desolate cybercity. Although most players expected a cute game—following the sweet journey of a lost cat—with novelty movement mechanics and a futuristic story, *Stray* ended up delivering an intensely complex plot to players around the world. The exploration of systemic classism, technology ethics, and generational trauma is crucial to the gameplay experience. Though the rules of its narrative world are not explicitly defined, and the game lacks some crucial forms of destinational feedback, by playing as a cat, *Stray*'s narrative uniquely separates the player from their environment which allows them to observe the complex systems of oppression within the game's setting. With a unique gameplay perspective and charming player character, mixed with a deeply troubling, yet modern, commentary on human society, *Stray* tackles its themes through the beauty of environmental storytelling and anecdotal reflection.

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## Characters

*Stray* features over 100 characters, including the player character, major NPCs, side characters, minor interactable NPCs, and others mentioned within the game space. Although other characters may be referenced during important moments of this narrative, this review list consists only of those with major character arcs or impact on the player character.

- **The Cat** – The protagonist/player character of the game, the stray orange tabby cat starts the game living in a cave on the outskirts of city ruins. He coexists with 3 other stray cats until a loose pipe causes him to fall into the slums of Walled City 99. Once separated and unable to return to his family, he is ushered into a cracked door on the city's edge by friendly-seeming electronic messages and signals. After realizing the only path back to the surface is through the city, the Cat teams up with B-12 and other Robot Companions known as “the Outsiders” to free itself from the city, along with the other Companions trapped. The Cat is characterized as fast and clever enough to escape the perils of the city, and he is referenced using the term “little one” throughout the game.
- **B-12** – A robot drone and AI mind who befriends the Cat upon its first entrance into the city. He is the one to guide the Cat inward, and eventually gets it to upload his consciousness into a small bot, explaining that he was the helper of a scientist trying to break out of the city. During the catastrophe that wiped out all of the humans in this city, there was an error with B-12's upload into the city network that corrupted his memory and code. This means that throughout the game, B-12 is gaining memories back (and new knowledge) right alongside the player. After meeting, B-12

decides to be the Cat's liaison and guides him through the robotic city. He acts as the translator, as well as a catalyst, for many events. Later in the game, B-12 realizes that he was not a Companion Bot before being uploaded into the network, he was the human scientist who tried to save himself from the plague after his family died. A glitch in the system caused him to be stuck in the network with minimal consciousness for hundreds of years. Still determined to save the Companions trapped in the city, B-12 sacrifices himself at the end of the game to fully unlock and overload the security features.

- B-12 provides an inventory (holding lights, weapons, objects, etc.), dialogue system, and exposition to the player. Without him present, the Cat cannot understand the language of any robots.

"But the upload, something went wrong. He was stuck for hundreds of years. Until... a little cat appeared.  
Was it? It was. Me. I was the scientist. I was human." – **B-12**

- **Momo** – A Companion part of the group known as the Outsiders, Momo is a central character met in the slums who, though needing some convincing, is elated to see that the Cat and B-12 are interested in making it to the surface. Until encountering the Cat, Momo has been shut away in his apartment trying to get his TV signal working so he can communicate with the rest of the Outsiders who have found their way out of the slums. He expresses great sadness in their absence and worries that they may not have made it because he cannot communicate with them. After collecting the rest of the Outsiders' journals, he gives the player a transceiver to place on the tallest building in the slums, which the Zurks have overrun. Once this quest is complete, Momo is able to contact his friends and give the Cat information on where he needs to head next. The player's last moments with Momo are him accompanying you partway into the sewers, where he cannot continue due to a broken door. However, he exclaims that he was braver than the last time The Outsiders attempted an escape. He is the first Companion the player must leave behind on the journey to the Outside.

"When you find Zbaltazar and Clementine, tell them I was brave." – **Momo**

- **Doc** – Another Companion part of the group known as The Outsiders, Doc is met in a sectioned-off part of the slums known as the "Dead City," where he has been stuck

for several years after a Zurk-killing invention of his loses power. When B-12 and the Cat appear, they help Doc reconnect the power to his invention, named the Defluxor, and Doc installs a small version of the machine into B-12's drone. The three then escape the Dead City with him. Doc reunites with his son, who had felt abandoned by him for years, and they are eternally grateful.

"Hey! Be careful with that Defluxor! At full charge, it can explode Zurks like confetti." – *Doc*

- **Zbaltazar** – One of Momo's old friends and an Outsider, Zbaltazar watches over an in-between level of the city known as Antvillage. When spoken with, he discloses that he once wished to see the outside world, but has now discovered meditation as a different way to let his mind roam free. Despite his own passion for discovering the Outside fading, Zbaltazar explains that Clementine has moved on from living in Antvillage and headed to Midtown in search of a way out of the City. He provides the player with Clementine's address on the back of a joint portrait and tells the Cat to go seek her out if he truly wants to leave.

"If you manage to reach the Outside, you will be the very first. I'd wish you good luck, but you don't need it. I believe in you." – *Zbaltazar*

- **Clementine** – The most passionate Companion in The Outsiders, and the one who made it the closest to the surface on their first journey upwards, Clementine is the last Outsider to aid the Cat in its mission. In Antvillage she is known for being an educator and nurturing face, while in Midtown, despite being liked by some of the general citizens, she ends up being a wanted "criminal" for her escape attempts. The player meets her after leaving Antvillage and arriving in Midtown. Although forced to constantly hide in an abandoned apartment from the watching eye of security bots, this does not quell her desire to leave the city and she seizes the opportunity to put her plans in motion when offered aid by the Cat/B-12. When their plans go wrong and all three end up imprisoned, Clementine does not give up and continues to defy the systems she's forced into. After escaping, she sacrifices herself to make sure the Cat and B-12 make it to the control room. Clementine is grounded and passionate; she stays moving toward her goals and places the well-being of others above herself, even when she knows the costs.

"The Outsiders Manifesto says "We must go Outside at any cost."  
I wrote that. You're one of us now. It's not that everyone has to get to  
the Outside. But one of us has to." – *Clementine*

- **Blazer** – One of the only antagonistic Companions met in the game, Blazer is a contact of Clementine who has agreed to help her steal an atomic battery from Neco Corporation's factory. First encountered in Midtown near the factory's entrance, Blazer is stand-offish until the Cat and B-1 present a message from Clementine to prove that they are an ally. He then asks the Cat to steal a worker's jacket and helmet so he can infiltrate the factory. Despite presenting himself as an ally to The Outsiders' cause upon first meeting, the player meets up with Blazer later in the chapter only to find that he has turned Clementine in to the authorities. He also betrays the Cat and B-12 by turning them in for the theft.

"Business is money. And I value money way more than friendship or camaraderie." – *Blazer*

- **The Sentinels** – Created in human times to protect residents of the city's Upper Level, the Sentinels enforce laws through violence. They patrol areas of suspicion or importance with a scanner that alerts them to the visual presence of movement. They are an antagonist present within Midtown, the Neco Corp factory, and the Jail.
- **Peacemakers** – Similar to Sentinels, Peacemakers are Companion-like robots that focus on patrolling areas and enforcing the law through verbal communication with the Companion bots. Though they are shown to be physical if provoked (via ads within the game), they are not programmed to enact physical harm, rather, they detain criminals and investigate crimes. Peacemakers are antagonists that patrol within Midtown and are not seen in classified areas (i.e. the factory and prison).
- **Zurks** – The recurring antagonists of the game, the Zurks are mutated trash-eating bacteria that multiply at an alarming rate and have evolved to eat living organisms as well as robotic life. They terrorize the trapped Companion bots in the slums and have eaten many of the "lower class" robots since the humans of the city died out. The Zurks are said to be the only living beings that have entered the city since the humans and the Cat. They hatch out of eggs that seem to spawn from an even larger, more grotesque, mutated organism covering much of the unlit slums.

"All trace of organic life has disappeared except for what we call the 'Zurk'. They seem to eat almost everything that moves and breed at an inconceivable rate. As if being locked in this City wasn't hard enough."

- *Zbaltazar's notes about Zurks [Chapter 4: The Slums]*

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## Breakdown

*Stray* is a game about being a cat in a world built for anything but. It excels in its extremely immersive atmosphere and environmental storytelling while maintaining detailed cat mechanics that bring joy to many who play it. However, deeper than that, *Stray* takes the player on a narrative journey that teaches the player how to interact with a culture and world that is not built for their player character. It embodies the exploration of a future that has fallen to the vices of our 21st-century society through the eyes of a creature that does not experience the world the way we do. The game examines dark, heavy themes of one's own mortality, the societal effect of classism, capitalistic greed within systems of justice, and even questions the morality of invention.

Before breaking down the thematic elements of the game, as well as its strengths and weaknesses within the narrative, it is important to understand the general structure of the game. There are 12 chapters in *Stray*, each with its own linear and non-linear narrative elements.

Chapter 1: Inside The Wall	A colony of cats is introduced as living in and around a deserted, overgrown city edge—the Outside. While traversing with the 3 other strays, the Cat slips off a loose pipe and into the depths of a ravine that leads to the bottom of the City.
Chapter 2: Dead City	The Cat is led into the city by a mysterious electronic signal. He explores an abandoned part of the city with some unknown skittering creatures, known as Zurks, and eventually runs into an aggressive, massive population of them (that attacks).
Chapter 3: The Flat	The Cat escapes the Zurks and finds out where the electrical signals have been leading. He then meets and rescues a new

	friend, B-12, who decides to accompany and help him find his way back to the surface.
Chapter 4: The Slums	The Cat travels further into the city and finds the slums. Initially, are scared that it's a Zurk invasion, but realize it's a creature who is new to the city. They explain the city is forever on lockdown and the elevator to the top is no longer operational. The Cat is sent to Momo, the only Companion left from a group known as "The Outsiders," their mission being to open up the locked city. The duo helps Momo find his friends' notebooks.
Chapter 5: Rooftops	Momo sends the Cat on a mission through Zurk-infested rooftops to install a Transceiver on the tower that will reactivate communication lines with the other Outsiders.
Chapter 6: The Slums - Part 2	Momo gets in touch with Zbaltazar, who tells them the only way up is through the sewers, but also warns that it's overrun with Zurks. In order to get a weapon to fight them, the Cat helps a bot named Seamus find his father, Doc, a fellow Outsider who left to test a Zurk weapon in the Dead City.
Chapter 7: Dead End	The Cat finds Doc, acquires a Zurk-exploding weapon (the Defluxor) for B-12, and brings him home to see Seamus.
Chapter 8: The Sewers	The Cat travels through the dangerous, Zurk-infested Sewers. B-12 has to save the Cat from a pile of Zurks using the Defluxor and knocks himself out.
Chapter 9: Antvillage	The Cat reaches the safe zone inside the Sewers. B-12 remembers that he used to be human. After speaking with Zbaltazar, the duo learns Clementine's address.
Chapter 10: Midtown	The Cat reaches Midtown and seeks a way to make the old subway train work. B-12 helps him get to Clementine, who explains that she has a plan to make the subway operational again. The Cat does a factory heist to get the atomic battery

	for their plan, with the help of Blazer, but he ends up turning them into the Sentinels.
Chapter 11: Jail	The Cat wakes up in prison and has to free himself, Clementine, and B-12. Once reunited, they incapacitate some of the Sentinels on patrol and break open the door that leads back toward Midtown. Clementine drives the Cat and B-12 to the subway station, then closes the gate behind them so she can fend off the Sentinels while they escape.
Chapter 12: Control Room	Up in the Control Room, none of the robots seem to have evolved into sentience, they are performing tasks as if humans are still present. The Cat works together with B-12 to hack the controls to open the city's roof and doors to go to the Outside. B-12 sacrifices himself to complete this and fries their drone body.

### **Perspective Through a Cat's Eye:**

One of the novelties of *Stray* is that it takes basic platforming game mechanics, collectible functions, or NPC interactions, and turns them on its head with a new perspective on how that's interpreted. Due to this, despite the general narrative structure of the game being rather typical for the genre—a strong linear story that employs non-linear sections for extra descriptive flavor and gameplay collectibles—there is an added element of unexpected conflict solution and environmental interaction.

A primary concern that comes with making the player character a non-standard creature is the topic of immersion and whether or not that can truly be achieved by putting the player in a foreign brain and body. The game struggles to bridge this gap at certain points in the narrative, specifically in terms of the cat's understanding of certain tasks or conversations. With that said, there is an element of the futuristic cybercity that lends itself to less questioning of these features. *Stray* also does something fascinating with this dilemma by leaning into that difference and using the character's separation from society to push a more complex narrative. This is something that many who critique this dissonance fail to acknowledge. However, a significant part of the game's narrative is reliant on the player understanding that they do not belong in the world they are exploring. To secure this response, the narrative designers present this concept to the player on multiple levels:

1. Experiencing the world as a cat is inherently foreign to the player beyond being an organic life form.



2. The Cat himself has fallen into a society made up of completely unfamiliar sentient creatures (robots who are not even organic life forms).
3. The Companions (robots), though living there, are enacting a system of existence that follows that of their human ancestors/counterparts. This means they are also living in a system they do not fully understand, as it was not built for them.

Embracing the mechanics available to the developers, in combination with its chosen narrative, not only makes the gameplay unique but adds to the poetic nature surrounding its thematic journey. The moments of the game that elevate this narrative element force the player to think philosophically about what their character's isolation means and what it feels like to exist in such a different place from their own experiences. Adding in the characterized cat mechanics (i.e. pawing things off shelves, scratching to knock on doors, and jumping onto almost everything, etc.), the writers secure a successful ludonarrative harmony with the gameplay experience.

### **The Last Trace of Humanity:**

Ludonarrative harmony comes from a balance between the overarching themes of a gameplay experience and the narrative expectations pushed upon the player's character. In the case of *Stray*, part of the game's elements consist of being a cat exploring an expansive and confusing world. Interactions with the world's objects are limited to that of a cat, and the Cat's only goal, personally, is to escape the city and reunite with his family. However, beyond this, *Stray* introduces a complex thematic element to the narrative. This means that a portion of the game also explores the robotic society that has evolved after the extinction of humans over 300 years prior. These themes consist of classism, government corruption, and capitalist greed: all concepts that a cat theoretically would be unable to comprehend.

In order to maintain the immersive elements of the game's narrative and understand its themes, the protagonist of *Stray*, the Cat, needs a liaison. The liaison that BlueTwelve introduces is the player's drone companion, B-12. With this, the player is now able to translate NPC conversations and gains the ability to use a digitized inventory system. Most importantly, however, this companion has lost many of its own memories of this society. This means that not only is B-12 a guide for a non-verbal animal exploring a foreign space, but the player learns about the world alongside B-12, encouraging a deeper observation of the society's systems. The narrative designer thereby avoids condescending over-explanation of concepts toward the player and, instead, forms a symbiotic relationship between the two. Finding world elements that aid in healing your guide's mind—and taking on the role of a human-like companion trying to watch over this cat—the player feels as though they are completing the objective of cat exploration when they stumble across these

memories for B-12. Through these memories, the Cat is introduced to B-12's backstory, as well as the important context of the city's current state of affairs.

There has been critique as to whether or not it makes sense to have the player consume backstory in such a way, as they are only a cat. Questions if the cat understands this communication, and why B-12 would share this with a non-verbal being have been raised. However, confiding in an animal, whether or not they can understand you, is a very human thing to do. Later on in the narrative, we learn that B-12 is a human at heart, and hasn't had anyone to talk to in an exceedingly long time. To B-12, this cat is a friend and one of the few creatures he can work through this trauma with, an emotional support animal of sorts.

This is all to say that though there is a great significance to all of the story and traces of humanity the Cat is provided with, the player is still constantly reminded that they are just a cat. The Cat may explore in ways unimaginable to the typical house cat owner. It may show affection to the characters that accompany it throughout the game, or sorrow when one of those Companions are left behind. However, the player character still sees the world through eyes that do not understand humanity, robots, or government. B-12's memories are even often presented as an exclamation of thoughts that he is working through himself, not as a full conversation with this mysterious creature. Ludonarrative dissonance exists when a game forces a player to accept its beliefs by not providing options to cope with them (Seraphine 3), and the recurring "cat moments" of the game are what help to diffuse the build-up of "this isn't what cats do or where they belong." This prevents extra clashes with missions and more intense narrative moments.



*After setting off the alarm and scaring off many of the robots out of major fear of a Zurk attack, the player gets to see an adorable moment of the Cat from the Guardian's perspective.*

### **Classism, Corruption, and Companions:**

The world of *Stray* is encapsulated by the Cat's experiences in "Walled City 99," one of the bunkers created by humans to avoid an unknown calamity. Eventually, the player learns that this was intended to be an underground utopia for those to escape the catastrophes outside. As is the case for many capitalistic societies, however, there soon became a growing gap between those with the most resources, and those with the least. The classism in *Stray* is so intense that it is physically displayed through almost every aspect of the environment. The game uses its strength, environmental storytelling, to make sure this divide is clear. Through high walls, falling trash, and decaying architecture, the limited resources of the Slums are made very clear.

The player first observes this when talking to NPCs in the Slums, who speak of a broken elevator physically keeping them at the bottom of the city, trash being dumped into their homes by the upper levels, and even the Zurks (originally meant to help with trash cleanup). These themes almost mirror real-world issues, one of the major ones being illegal solid-waste dumping. Instead of properly disposing of garbage or studying/changing how it's produced, much of it ends up amidst the lowest-income families (Ngalo). This is almost exactly how they present the trash dilemma within the game. Trash is seen falling over the walls of the upper city, and even when the player reaches Midtown, the Companions up there have been conditioned to believe that "giving" their trash to the Slums is the right thing to do. This leads to something even more complex than trash-dumping: the corrupted economic systems *Stray* showcases through its narrative.

The game uses the inventors of their main antagonists to push the themes of the downfall that comes from capitalistic police states. As mentioned, when reaching Midtown, the player realizes that citizens believe the narrative that the trash being thrown into the Slums is sent there to be recycled. Most do not have a moral awareness that what they are enabling is wrong, or even harmful. The game introduces these concepts through dialogue, but also uses advertisements throughout Midtown's environment to showcase the state of its current affairs. One of these ads is for "Neco Corporation," an old human trash company—now run by Companion bots—that is responsible for the dumping of garbage into the lower-class Slums. When you talk to certain Companions, specifically one who seems to be collecting trash, it's clear that a fake narrative has convinced most of Midtown that their dumping is for the greater good.

The game further escalates this narrative by introducing the Sentinels and Peacemakers in Midtown, which the player learns were also built and owned by Neco Corp. When writing these law enforcers, the developers gave them a partially sentient, yet strictly programmed system, that has only evolved to fit the new identities of those being governed.

This choice leads to player-interpreted commentary on corruption in the criminal justice system of the 21st century. Players may ask, is society's law enforcement actively enforcing violence or enforcing systems they do not understand?

Studies have shown that many police department budgets "...go toward fruitless traffic stops than responses to service calls – essentially wasting millions of public dollars" (Kanu). *Stray* supports that law enforcement can target the wrong people. The first narrative introduction to the Sentinels and Peacemakers is when the player reaches Midtown and sees a robot—claiming to be innocent—being chased relentlessly by them. This suspicion toward the law enforcement of Midtown grows when the Cat encounters Clementine, his hope to escape the city and friend of prior agreeable NPCs, plastered onto a "Wanted" sign on screens around the city. These narrative elements align well with the stealth-strategy gameplay mechanics, which later show the Sentinels being highly hostile entities that cannot distinguish between actual morality. The thematic concept is sealed with a memory from B-12 and, soon after, the Cat (along with B-12 and Clementine) being arrested by the Sentinels—where the player then encounters a disturbing, old, correctional facility.

"They were the perfect tool to keep the city under control. Obedient, unquestioning, tireless. Even after the end of humans, they continued to exert their control. **Always on duty, relentless.**"

- B-12's memory about the Sentinels in Ch 10

### The World We Inherit:

The most fascinating theme uniquely explored through *Stray*'s narrative is that of the effects of intergenerational trauma on a society. At first glance, most players and designers would find this odd, as the Companion bots do not mention the ability to reproduce, and many would consider a mechanical invention to be incapable of perpetuating systems of trauma. That this emerges from an unexpected place is what makes the usage of this theme so profound. Combined with the player character's perspective being so different from their own, the choice to use robots—artificial beings whose human personality traits are so vibrant yet bizarre—makes the player pay more attention to their habits. Typical human acts no longer make sense to these characters. Their dialogue about societal structures they don't understand makes the audience even more crucially aware that the systems are dysfunctional or harmful.

When games use human society to critique societal systems, players are adept at writing off aspects they would rather ignore. Humans simply do not pay attention to the

patterns of other humans because the social norms they have always lived within justify them. A human is betraying another so they can get some extra money in a game? It's an awful moment to watch and one that may linger with them after playing, but there are hundreds of different reasons that a human would think that way. Humankind needs food, water, medical care, shelter—things that may also cost money. Therefore, a player can justify this as a character doing what they need to survive or ignore it to continue viewing other moments.

*Stray* flips this concept on its head by creating an environment so familiar yet foreign to our own that the player becomes more vigilant of the shortcomings of the social constructs presented. The audience watches Companions exist in human society. Robots who have expressed not needing to eat learn from humans to consume food. A Companion named Elliot shivers because he learns that creatures can get sick, despite not being able to catch an illness. Small acts like these are lighthearted ways to show the player that the robots are mimicking the behavior of those who came before them: the humans. On a more reflective narrative note: when speaking with the Companions, they reference the humans fondly, as the “soft ones” and as their ancestors. Ancestry does not always provide the tools for success, however, and the systems of power the robots have inherited alongside their more benign actions prove this.

The critiques of classism within *Stray* (see *breakdown section: Classism, Corruption, and Companions*) are a prevalent theme of the game's narrative. However, this theme ultimately stems from the way the Companions have taken on aspects of their predecessors both good and bad - a form of intergenerational trauma, cyclically passed down and reenacted by these NPCs. Recreating human thoughts and behaviors is completely foreign to the Companions. They even mention several times throughout their dialogue that certain actions they take do not make sense to them. In recreating the actions of the humans, the Companions also recreate social systems resulting in oppression. Systemic oppression originates from greed and desires linked to human existence. The typical driving force of maintaining these structures (i.e. power, money, and resources) does not apply to the Companions. In other words, the Companions are compulsively enforcing these harmful systems in an attempt to cope with their inherited societal constructs and issues. Blazer, for instance, betrays Clementine and the Cat by turning them into the Sentinels. He tells them, “Business is money. And I value money way more than friendship or camaraderie” (Blazer Ch 10). Realistically, however, there is no economy for him to use this money in. He is perpetuating an oppressive system that he doesn't benefit from for the mere sake of following in the footsteps of the long-departed humans who maintained it. Intergenerational trauma is often defined as when children mirror unhealthy coping mechanisms from parents/guardians who exhibit deregulated emotions from trauma

throughout their lives (Laquihon). The actions of Blazer, other companions dancing and drinking in the nightclub, as well as those seeking escapism through other means or supporting the actions of Neco Corp, are all striking narrative examples of this theme explored through characters the audience would never expect to see it from.

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## Strongest Element

The strongest narrative element of *Stray* is the in-depth environmental world-building paired with its collection of vibrant and unique non-player characters. Despite choosing a player character that was a non-verbal creature—one unable to understand any humanoid conversations without a translator—*Stray* does a magnificent job of entertaining complex narrative themes and storylines. The game proves that a developer can do a massive amount of storytelling simply through the environment surrounding a player. *Stray*'s environment is characterized and bolstered by three main aspects: the visual narrative elements, the NPCs' unique motifs, and B-12's memories.

The visual storytelling of *Stray* is an extremely strong aspect of its narrative. Even without speaking to NPCs, just consuming the art on the walls, reading the signs, and the general atmosphere of each area the Cat visits is enough to understand what kind of world the characters are living in. Each residential section of the city (the Slums, Antvillage, Midtown, and the Control Room) has significantly different moods and connotations of how they are run. The Slums are more crowded than Midtown and filled with trash, which is shown to be falling from areas above it. Antvillage is clearly a residence that exists outside of the system. The environmental aspects differ significantly from those in both the Slums and Midtown, but they also clearly have a limited number of resources. From there, the Control Room is tidy and polished, filled with working tools and classy furnishing.



*Different atmospheric scenes from Chapter 1's setting of the game (The Outside), Chapter 9's setting (Antvillage), and Chapter 10's setting (Midtown)*

This environmental storytelling is furthered by the clear characterization of each NPC met during the game. Despite being robots, the Companions have truly adopted human culture, and in many cases are just as, if not more, expressive when interacting with the player and the world around them. Each sentient bot has a different opinion to share or a moment to reminisce about. They also all carry themselves with a different air and style themselves accordingly. The bots you do meet and work with all have very full stories and motivations behind every action. Even the introduction of these lively robots is a powerful moment of environmental storytelling. The Cat walks toward a Companion cleaning on the edge of the Slums, which leads to a panicked alarm system being set off, as the robots believe him to be a Zurk. This means that the first tone of these NPCs' is seeing them all in a major panic, robots sprinting away and hiding from what is actually a harmless cat. Having such a diverse and animated cast of NPCs vastly increases player interest in interaction. It also supports the cat-like curiosity that the game encourages players to take on.

Finally, the most fascinating and compelling part of exploring *Stray's* worldbuilding through its environment is the decision to use B-12's memories as a primary means of communication when encountering a significant environmental puzzle piece. This gives the player a figure to relate to as they learn, as well as extra context for environments they stumble across that may need extra detail. This use of anecdotal storytelling bridges the gap between NPC personality and plain environmental storytelling. Oftentimes, using an environment to provide the player with narrative context can go only so far into the actual

detail created for the world. B-12's memories allow the player to consume these details without it feeling forced upon them.

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## Unsuccessful Element

Although part of the strength of *Stray* is in its environmental storytelling, its biggest weakness lies within that element as well. Environmental storytelling can only be successful if it is also accessible. With so much to explore, a bolstered narrative, unique character design, and endless amounts of objects to jump on, the game becomes overwhelming to navigate at times. This can lead certain players to become discouraged or frustrated with the narrative, which leads them to disregard elements of it early on.

Despite this vast environment being a testament to the amazing art and narrative design of the project, giving the player enough feedback to navigate certain sections of the world is crucial. When this is not provided, a narrative world can suffer instead of thrive. Players will avoid going deeper into story components that could completely change their outlook on a theme or contextual concept. Although a large, stimulating world is a hub for endless environmental storytelling and collectibles to find—and the vastness works cohesively with the concept that the player is a cat—the player feels lost at certain points because there are no mechanics in place to balance the openness of the world.

It can be understandable to resist these kinds of accommodations out of fear that it may dilute the artistic and narrative immersion, or mechanical components in the game. In fact, some research conducted on destination feedback shows that “one has to be careful with providing interface cues that give away too much,” (Burgos et al. 13). This is true: too much navigational feedback can feel overbearing, confusing, and less immersive. Many argue that it's more fun to avoid minimaps or such cues in adventure games, and no designer looks forward to implementing a system that could break the narrative understanding of their world. With that said, the reality of *Stray* is that the world is already fantastical. The players have already decided to accept the game's narrative rules of a dystopian future, cyber city, talking robots, a mini-drone accompaniment, and playing as a cat. Following its own narrative expectations, there are plenty of creative ways to implement an optional map (whether through B-12 or graffiti on the streets), a list, or some other way to show the places available to traverse. Even if these were only available during certain open-map segments, it could change the game in terms of accessibility for certain players. As a narrative designer, making sure that players feel empowered to engage in the gameplay that facilitates our narrative is extremely important.

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## Highlight

The highlight of *Stray* is the culmination of its entire narrative at the game's end. After a long and grueling journey through each section of the city, narrowly escaping the



clutches of several antagonists, the player reaches the control room. When they step off the elevator with B-12, they find that this city level is significantly cleaner than any other. It's filled with signs advertising Walled City 99 as the "safest city." The cleanliness starts to make sense as the Cat meets robots who have not evolved into sentience. Their presence is a narrative element meant to juxtapose previous player interaction with the world, which gives them a greater understanding of the story and highlights the level. Unlike the very animated companions, these robots are stiff and cordial only. They refer to humans as their bosses rather than ancestors, and point you in the direction of the engineers when asked about the City Lockdown.

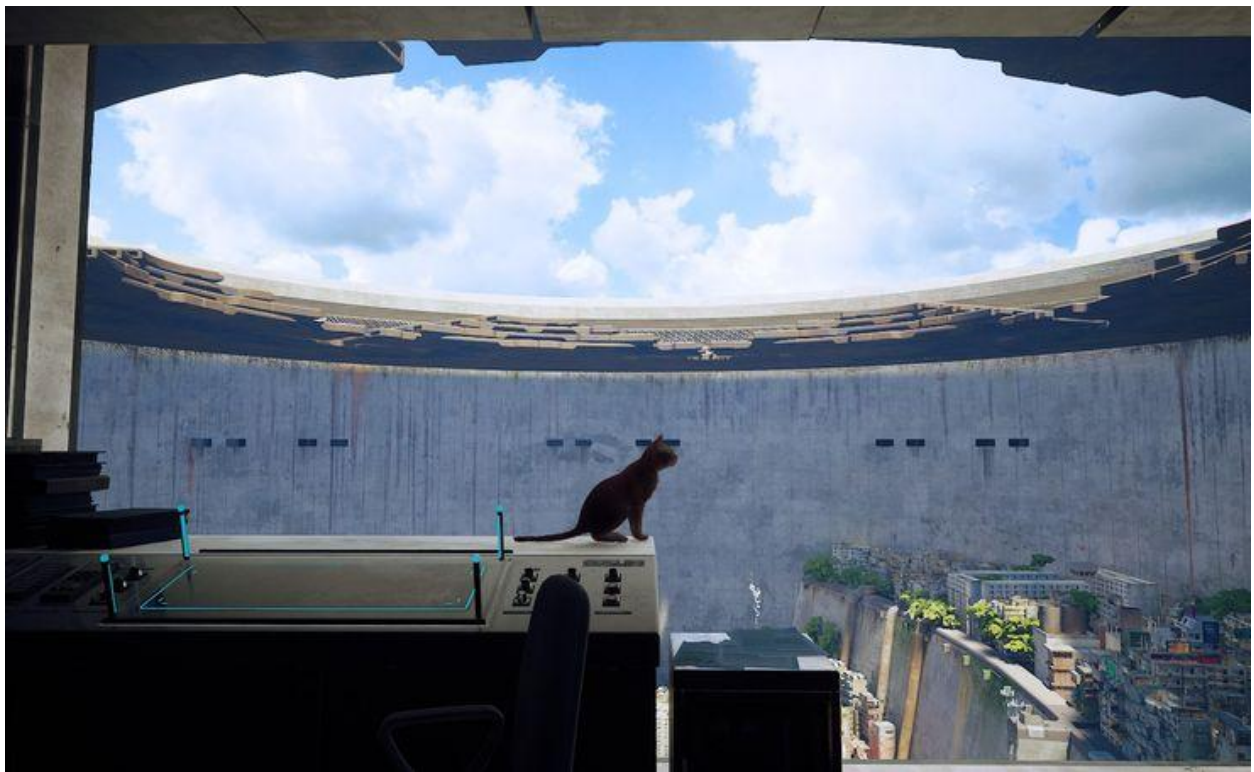
These interactions, though a jarring experience, are not what makes this section of the game such a highlight. As B-12 and the Cat reach the engineering area, there's a massive, full-wall window that overlooks the entire city. Looking out this window, the player can reflect on their experiences thus far, and physically see how far they have traveled even as two tiny creatures. This reflection period is beautifully designed by the developers and becomes even more significant when the player reaches the end of the game. Throughout the hacking of the security system to open the city's door and roof, ending the lockdown, the Cat watches B-12's drone body deteriorate. Although the Cat cannot fully understand this, eventually he has to physically bring B-12 to the last hack point. B-12 explains that he knew his body would be destroyed by shutting down the system, but that opening the city for everyone he has met along this journey—for all those who couldn't leave before they passed—was more important than keeping the "last human" alive or even seeing the Outside himself.

"I'm sorry we won't see the Outside together. I thought I needed to carry on the memories of humanity. To hold onto the past. But, I see a future in the Companions. And you." – *B-12 saying goodbye to the Cat (Ch 12)*

B-12 uses the last of his power to deactivate the city lockdown protocol, dropping him down to the ground lifeless. In this viscerally emotional moment, the Cat jumps down and starts to nudge B-12 with his head, possibly expecting him to wake up as he does earlier in the game. Eventually, however, the Cat's nudges turn to nuzzles and he resigns himself to just curling up next to the lifeless B-12.

Finally, while the cat is curled up, the player sees the TV screens signify the roof opening, and it does just that. The player gets the closure of seeing sunlight hit the city for the first time in centuries. This kills the Zurks, who cannot touch UV rays, which is a moment of triumph for the player. Then we see several NPCs from earlier chapters react to

the sunlight: Momo and other memorable Companions in the Slums are in awe, Clementine is saved when the security protocol shuts down, which turns off the Sentinels chasing her. All of these characters that the player has worked with along the way are experiencing just as much emotion as the audience is, and seeing them revisited provides a sense of closure. This evokes a sense of happiness in the player that is once again dashed when they realize they cannot pick up B-12 to bring his body with them when leaving the city. Even outside of this moment, the only way to escape the city is to work with other NPCs. Tragically, on each leg of the journey, the Cat also always has to leave someone behind to progress. Sacrifice is the only way forward for the player, but so is teamwork. Losing B-12—the only NPC who was able to travel with them the entire journey—raises the stakes even higher. This contrasts that positive emotional journey with a devastating loss.



*The opening of Walled City 99's rooftop during Chapter 12 (Control Room) and the light shining on buildings for the first time in centuries.*

This entire sequence is very satisfying for the player. It's a major accomplishment and visible change to the game world, which is a well-done moment of powerful art-based narrative feedback. The Cat can even sit by the window and watch for the entire time the roof opens, seeing the sunlight pour over each portion of the city for the first time. It is a beautiful narrative moment that also crosses with the stunning art assets and lighting of the game. The happiness and awe of the scene, however, is also cut by the strong undertones of

grief and sadness that come with B-12's death orchestrated so strikingly a couple of minutes earlier. This combination, the balance between the emotions evoked by the narrative and the art design involved, is what makes the ending an unforgettable one.

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## Critical Reception

**IGN** – 8/10, Tom Marks

Tom Marks tells players, “This is a wonderfully rich world I enjoyed learning all about.” He states that although the concept of playing in the paws of an average cat might seem initially silly, “*Stray* uses that furry vehicle to tell a genuinely compelling story with some entertaining action along the way.” Overall, Marks’ verdict is that *Stray* sets itself apart from being just a novelty; it’s a “delightful cat-based platforming adventure in a cyberpunk world worth exploring,” with his biggest critique being that the movement mechanics were less nimble than hoped for.

**PC Gamer** – 82/100, Jon Bailes

Jon Bailes comments on the fact that acting like a cat is actually quite natural in a puzzle platformer, this leads to his statement that “*Stray* simply makes such activities more natural, giving us the perfect form for the job.” Bailes praises *Stray* for knowing how to move from one system to the next, and indulging cat-like inquisitiveness throughout its detailed ruins, avoiding redundant encounters that could be caused by some of its more simplistic mechanics. Finally, he compliments the game on an astounding feat: making “even some defenceless stealth sequences...not only tolerable, but actually entertaining—surely a first.”

**GameSpot** – 9/10, Alessandro Barbosa

Alessandro Barbosa calls the game gorgeous “with richly-detailed hubs that have a lot to find in them.” He exclaims that it’s rare to see a game offer such a different perspective on something that is also, in a sense, so familiar. Barbose describes “Touching moments between several characters” that add to the core theme of companionship and calls the game a “Delicate tale of friendship with some charming writing.” Although he comments on certain combative pacing issues in the first half of the game, overall, Barbosa found that *Stray* “tells a tale that will likely linger with you after the game’s credits have rolled.”

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## Lessons

**Extensive worlds are great for storytelling, but remember that navigational feedback is important to make them work.**

Sometimes there is so much worldbuilding in a game that it can be easy to get lost with where you need to go or have already been. These problems mainly arise during the non-linear sections of a narrative and can be discouraging for players that struggle with navigation or even object permanence. Despite directional feedback through lights and flickers, in *Stray*, it can still be hard to know where you have been and still need to go. This should be a reminder that though charming sci-fi worlds thrive when built out, empowering players to navigate the story's environment is an important aspect of designer-player support.

**Unique character concepts can still elicit empathy from players**

Often in game narrative creation, designers worry that a player character or NPC being too "radically different" from an expected audience will hinder their ability to connect with that character's journey. *Stray* proves that this is not the case. Players can connect emotionally with any character when written with layers and individualized. Some themes may even become more coherent when presented through the lens of different creatures.

**Environmental storytelling is a powerful tool, especially in a deeply artistic world.**

Working together as narrative designers and environmental artists can be the key to unlocking the potential of a world yet to be designed. Embedding narrative elements into a vastly artistic setting for a game creates an atmosphere that feels cohesive and immersive for a player. It also encourages the player to explore both the story and art assets within the game, which can also create a more well-rounded experience.

**Calling back characters at the end of a narrative can be a great tool and important closure for the player.**

Revisiting non-player characters throughout a narrative is always a satisfying way of making players feel as though their experiences have been meaningful. However, bringing back a character toward the end of a narrative is specifically an effective method of creating closure for a player. It can also be a moment of accomplishment to see the environment of a game change and be expressed through the characters a player meets along the way.

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## Summation

*Stray* delivers a high-quality game that does not rely only on its novelty player character. It has beautiful environmental storytelling and does an excellent job handling a non-verbal character while also covering such an intense storyline. Though the game lacks certain navigational feedback and the rules of its world are left ambiguous, it leans into its potential weaknesses and individualized features to bolster its world rather than break it. *Stray* uses the separation of the player character from the world—layered with a complex system of injustice—to create a robust story, though futuristic, relevant to our times through its allegorical themes that critique the downfalls of 21st-century political and economic landscapes.

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