

# Game Narrative Review

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**Game Title:** Transistor

**Platform:** PC, PS4, iOS, Nintendo Switch

**Genre:** Turn-based Action RPG

**Release Date:** May 20, 2014

**Developer:** Supergiant Games

**Publisher:** Supergiant Games

**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** Greg Kasavin

## Overview

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You, the player, enter the digital city of Cloudbank as Red in the middle of her worst night ever. There's a body on the ground in front of her, impaled by a strange sword with an unsettling red inlay in the blade like an eye. You don't know this person yet, but he's the most important part of the narrative.

*"Hey Red, we're not gonna get away with this, are we?"*

Red takes the sword, the Transistor, and together they set off. While initially the plan is to flee the city, Red instead decides to confront the group responsible for this death and many others, the Camerata.

A group of individuals with ambitious plans for the city involving sentient machines called the Process. But when ownership of the Transistor was transferred to Red, the Process began destroying Cloudbank indiscriminately. Now, Red has become the Camerata's number one target – if the Process don't get to her first.

## Characters

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*"You got on the Camerata's shortlist. More than just a name to them now."*

- **Red** – Cloudbank's most renowned singer, Red was initially targeted by the Camerata due to her status as a cultural icon. In contrast, she herself is a guarded and private person. While she survived the Camerata's attack, her voice was taken in the process, making her a silent protagonist. Despite this, Red isn't a blank slate for the player to project onto – Supergiant subverts the silent protagonist trope by making her a major driving force in the narrative and giving her opportunities to express herself in-game. For example, there are OVC terminals that players can read and comment on, but Red decides

Everyone knows her and will have pre-existing reactions that can't be altered by the player. From the start of the game, the Transistor speaks familiarly to her and the player is playing catch up to piece together their relationship. Posters of her face decorate walls of the game's levels, bathed in gold, and her song plays as background music. This idealized image, compared to reality, serves to make both the present Red and the player feel like they stand in the shadow of her past glory.

- **Transistor** – Where Red stands in the spotlight, the Transistor is a welcoming voice in the background. There are two parts to the Transistor; the weapon and the man who speaks from within. Originally, he was a person who existed outside of Cloudbank’s census and Red’s lover. During the attack on Red, he was unexpectedly in her company and was killed and integrated into the Transistor instead. As one of two characters present from the beginning, he serves a narrator role in the story, telling the player information Red cannot convey. He also serves as their weapon and can communicate with other Traces, and with any technology nearby. It’s also implied that the UI indicators of the game’s environment and enemies are created by the Transistor.

- **Sybil Reisz** – The Camerata’s eyes and ears. An event planner for Cloudbank, Sybil lured in potential victims for the Camerata, including Red. However, she was frustrated that Red grew distant due to what she believed was the interference of another. To rectify this, she devised the circumstances of the attack on Red in order to eliminate Transistor. She remained at the Empty Set after the night and was infected by the process, ultimately attacking the player, losing her life. The Transistor then uses her Trace data to lead them to the rest of the Camerata. It also unlocks access to breakrooms where the player can rest throughout the game.

- **Asher Kendrell** – A prolific writer and editor for OVC with a burning curiosity. Frustrated by the contradictions and murkiness of Cloudbank’s history, he began interviewing venerable figures in society in the hopes of piecing together the city’s true history, leading him to Grant. After that failed night, he and Grant locked themselves away in Bracket Towers, where he leaves messages for Red through the OVC terminals outside. He publishes a formal confession of the Camerata’s crimes before he and Grant take their own lives before Red can face them.



***“Grant Kendrell’s the man behind the Camerata. Without a doubt. Beats being an admin.”***

- **Grant Kendrell** – The leader of the Camerata. After decades of administrative service, always pleasing the majority no matter what stance, he eventually grew distanced from the wishes of the population and determined to change the city according to what he believed was best. He founded the Camerata with longtime friend Royce Bracket and was the first User of the Transistor, able to command it without touch (as seen in his assassination attempt on Red). Asher describes him as changed by the loss of the Transistor. He claims he doesn’t want to end up like Sybil as the reason why he takes his life – both he and Asher seem to have been infected by the Process.

***“Bracket. I know the name but not the man. Heard he got out of town a while back.”***

- **Royce Bracket** – Engineer of the city, one of the two founding members of the Camerata. Having become disillusioned with the cyclical but fleeting whims of Cloudbank’s citizens and faded into the country, he discovered a formula detailing exactly how the city was formed. He began predicting how it would take shape until he saw into the process, and found the Transistor.

Following the fall of Cloudbank, he leads Red via proxy to the Cradle where the Transistor is meant to reside in order to stop the Process. During their battle, he gains a Transistor of his own but is seemingly unable to hear any voice from it despite having access to the same attacks. He states that whether Red defeats him or not, he has won – he seems unfazed by the prospect of being integrated, even curious, but this cracks at the end of the fight when his Transistor disappears. He is softspoken and detached, and was the first to suggest potential targets for the Camerata.

## Breakdown

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### Background & Motivation

Cloudbank is a digital utopic democracy in which everything, from the buildings to the color of the sky, changes according to the wishes of its citizens. While this sounds promising, it means everything is fleeting. According to the motto of the Camerata, when everything changes, nothing changes. Those four individuals sought to provide stability to the city, something that would outlast those whims. They began selecting high-profile, influential figures with novel perspectives and talents to integrate into the Transistor, whose disappearances could be explained away. One of them was Red.

Despite her meticulous work thus far, Sybil’s obsession with Red and resentment of Mr Nobody drove her to lie to the Camerata. On the night of one of Red’s shows, he was killed, and he and Red’s voice were integrated in her place. However, his lack of census data caused a malfunction, transporting him and Red across the city and removing Grant’s ownership of the Transistor.

While the Camerata’s methods are despicable, they are somewhat sympathetic. A core part of being human is often to resist change. As Asher says, “Everything [they] did was for Cloudbank.” When Red and the Transistor arrive at Bracket Towers, he notes that their hideout was designed for damage control and saving people. Asher publishes an admission of guilt listing the Camerata’s actions and their names before he dies. Royce also, as the last surviving member of the Camerata, seeks Red out for a truce to preserve the city from the Process. He

doesn't attempt to take control of the Transistor for himself, allowing Red access to the Cradle instead, stating that he'd settle for not being wiped out along with all of existence. Both he and Asher are cordial and forthcoming, acknowledging their failure and Red's justified anger matter-of-factly. While this isn't necessarily an indication of their character, it does demonstrate their professionalism and awareness. That is not to say that they aren't selfish or duplicitous, only that they're complex people.

## Style & Music

The art and music of *Transistor* are essential to its narrative and identity. The art style is a mix of cyberpunk and art nouveau, with a hint of the Roaring Twenties. This contradiction of past and future defines Cloudbank; everchanging, but always coming back to where it began. The colors are lush and glittering, the architecture ornate and natural – everything the Process is not. Part of the tragedy of watching Cloudbank being consumed by the Process is seeing the beautiful environments Red's been running through replaced by blank white cubes and blaring red lights.

The Camerata are also themed in red and white, creating a hostile association with the Process. At first it seems like they're the masters of the Process – later, it seems like they're infected by it, broken down and consumed like everything else.

The music contributes no less than the art. The soundtrack transitions seamlessly between jazz tracks and the eerie synthetic beats of the Process as Red fights through the city. She, of course, is the star. Though mute, her music is entwined with the gameplay – such as in Sybil's boss fight, scored by Red's song *In Circles*. As it begins, the song is populated by Red's vocals. But as the fight progresses, it slowly gets overtaken by synthetics and becomes unstable, mirroring Sybil's deterioration as she screams at Red. Equally poignant is one of her lines, "I wanted to save you, I wanted to save you—" contrasted against the chorus "*but I won't save you*". When the art and music come together, they give the story a powerful impact.

This is just one example of Red's music intertwining with events of the game. When the Transistor is placed in its Cradle, both Red and Royce are transported to a place inside the Transistor, where there are hundreds of it scattered everywhere. Royce wields one as well, and states that in order to escape, one of them must be integrated. After defeating Royce, Red can return to Cloudbank and rebuild the city using the Transistor. While the options are limitless, she instead chooses to return to the place where her lover died. She sits next to him and commands the Transistor to integrate her as well. The song that plays as the credits roll, *Paper Boats*, is about two people destined to be together no matter what happens and features both of their voices. At the end, we see that they are reunited inside the Transistor, before being presented with the option to begin the game again, as though no matter how often the cycle continues, they will always reunite at the end.

## Functions & Storytelling

Most of the storytelling in *Transistor* is subtle and slowly teased out. While the very basic plot is simple, the context is tied to gameplay and exploration, as the player puts together different but interconnected pieces of story. They can do so by reading OVC terminals, found throughout the game's levels, and through the Function files.

Every character in *Transistor* has a Trace, a collection of their data. Functions are different combat abilities derived from those Traces. Each Function contains a personal file that slowly expands as the player uses it in different combinations. While its primary purpose is to encourage experimentation in gameplay, the Function files also flesh out the surrounding world and context of the game.

The files tell the stories of different people and how they came to be integrated in the Transistor, but they can draw connections for the player to pursue. For example, the first new Function the player obtains is Spark(), belonging to Lillian Platt. Using Spark() reveals that Lillian was killed because she was investigating the disappearance of her friend Maximillias Darzi. Much later in the game, the player can receive Maximillias' Function Purge(), which details his career as a clothier and his struggle with "certain dependencies" to which the Camerata offered a cure. In addition, the player can find an OVC terminal reporting that foul play has not been ruled out in Lillian's disappearance. None of this is relevant to the main plot of the game, but it makes the Camerata's past victims feel more like people while rewarding the player for their curiosity.

In addition to Functions, there are Limiters which contain files on the Process. These are explained in-universe as safeguards Royce had built into the Process; equipping a Limiter removes a safeguard, making gameplay more difficult but unlocking information about the associated Process, including weaknesses. Their files are comprised of Royce's observations, written to mimic coding comments.

The Camerata also have Functions with files detailing their personal histories. They fill in gaps in the player's knowledge and grant insight into their lives, like Sybil's obsession and Royce writing his own file in prose, making these shadowy antagonists empathetic. Meanwhile, the Transistor exists outside the census and has almost no personal data in his file, sparking curiosity in the player to learn more about him.

## Strongest Element

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***"I will always find you / Like it's written in the stars." – Paper Boats***

The Transistor is the device that started it all, and he's the man who starts the game. He's the guide/Greek chorus commenting on the events where Red is the silent protagonist. But he isn't presented as an impassive narrator, just as Red isn't a blank slate. When the player is dropped into the middle of the action, the Transistor provides context for their immediate surroundings and a friendly voice. Right from the beginning, they're a team. As the game progresses, however, the player gets the sense that they're more than just partners in crime.

Logan Cunningham, who voiced the narrator in Supergiant's previous game *Bastion*, voices the Transistor. This isn't an analysis of his (very good) voice acting, but their history is evident in the writing of his dialogue, as it incorporates on-screen events naturally and is reactive to the player's actions. Closer to a companion character, he, like everyone else, has opinions about the city and his chatter fills the spaces between battles as the player runs through mostly linear levels. He conveys essential and background information to the player, seamlessly switching between the two, giving context to their actions but never inundating them with exposition.

The writing for the Transistor is incredibly natural and personable, and an essential aspect to get right for the narrative's overall quality. Despite having no census data to find, over the course of the game the player connects with him and learns so much about who he really is.

*"I see you hurting, I do what I can / But I won't save you." – In Circles*

I have to criticize Sybil's characterization too. Her Function files mention an "infatuation" with Red and she lied to the Camerata to get rid of her lover. She stays at the Empty Set afterwards and is infected, going mad. While there are elements that give her depth, she's unfortunately reminiscent of the crazy lesbian trope. Adding to that, while not outright stated, Grant and Asher are most likely married, making at least three of the four antagonistic characters queer in contrast to the protagonists' (straight-passing) relationship. While having queer antagonists or villains isn't inherently wrong, it does follow a long history of villainizing and killing queer people in media. However, Supergiant Games has improved in this area, with their (current) latest game Hades allowing the main character Zagreus to romance characters of any gender.

*“Stop grieving, start leaving / Before we all become one / Run.” – We All Become*

At the end is a podium with a microphone stand. The player is prompted to hum, beginning a flashback to the night of the attack. Red *sings* as, for the first time, I witness exactly what happened just prior to the game. The Camerata meant to target Red, cornering her as she





practiced after her show. Just before the blade reaches her, a faceless man steps in front of it instead as the music crescendos and the scene falls away. The player is back at the beginning area of the game, except the background is dark and greyed out. The only source of color comes from Red's gown, which is long and restricts her movement.

There's an OVC terminal ahead. As someone who explores every part of a game, I head to it, but all the while I can hear the Transistor's voice nearby, calling out to Red in anguish. She cannot call back, and as time passes, he grows increasingly panicked, and I struggle to focus on the screen in front of me. Red's slowed movement makes the walk agony. By this time, the player will have formed an attachment to the Transistor and reaching him becomes their primary goal. Being separated from their only weapon also puts them in a state of vulnerability, matching Red's own state. Finally reaching him is a release of the tension built up from all the events of the night, returning to the present.

## Critical Reception

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Danielle Riendeau of Polygon praises the richness of Cloudbank, giving the game an 8.5/10. The storytelling, she says, "is fragmentary but effective, escalating the stakes with every twist." She concludes that "Transistor's grace and beauty go far below skin deep. [...]The game's vision is intoxicating, and its execution is inspired."

Caroline Petit of GameSpot praises the writing of the game, describing "a touch of magic, even of spirituality, to Transistor's story, a sense that there are things within the world of Cloudbank that transcend our understanding of what's possible," giving it a score of 8/10.

Marty Sliva gives it a 9/10 on IGN, commending the uniqueness and depth of the characters, stating that "none of the characters in Transistor fall into typical video game or science fiction conventions." He also appreciates the subtle way it conveys its story. "It respects your ability to fill in the blanks, and relies on subtlety in a way that few games ever do."

## Lessons

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- ❑ **It's difficult to harmonize a character's purpose with the player's perception.** Usually, the narrative and game needs of a character conflicts with their personal character needs – to have depth and consistent natural behavior, while also managing to appear to the player as though they possess all the above qualities. Supergiant had to be careful writing the dialogue for the Transistor, as it could easily have annoyed players to listen to hours of a character commenting on their every action. Or he could've seemed too mechanical and expository, explaining all the gameplay to the player. Instead, he and Red have their own personalities while driving the plot forward, yet leaving room for the player to act on their own.
- ❑ **Story can be a powerful motivation to engage with mechanics.** Personally, I had settled on a few ways I'd wanted to utilize my Functions by the time I realized I could unlock new files. This encouraged me to change my loadout and experiment in order to learn more about the game's story. With how shadowy it could be, and how subtle its storytelling methods are, the files are an excellent, and obvious, way to increase the

player's understanding. Unlocking another Function, one they might not otherwise use, becomes unlocking a new character to learn about. Of course, this should be paired with other gameplay motivators for optimal effect.

- **A strong visual style supports a narrative and vice versa.** The saying goes “a picture is worth a thousand words” and *Transistor* recognizes the narrative potential of its aesthetics. Design influences players’ perceptions, which can be toyed with or subverted in interesting ways. Using contrasting elements of design to highlight different factions strengthens their sense of identity, and they can be employed to emphasize a drastic change in tone, like when one of the many streets ends abruptly with giant white blocks in place of buildings spreading their taint across the floor. *Transistor* can let its visuals describe scenes in place of words. Music, too, is an important aesthetic consideration to fuel a narrative.

## Summation

What drew me into *Transistor* was the gorgeous art style and the unique blend of futuristic and digital aesthetics with art nouveau. What kept me hooked, however, was the unique story hidden within. It's not an easy story to discover, but that's a part of the enjoyment – pieces will continue to click long after the game has been put down, and the effort is well worth the result. Complex and human, *Transistor* tells a tale about how the best intentions can have irreversible effects and how far we'll go for the things, or people, we love. And every part of the game, though linear in structure, allows to player to engage freely with itself, to explore as much as they want. It doesn't force understanding, but allows it to come naturally on the player's own time.

## Works Cited

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