

# Game Narrative Review

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**Game Title:** Stray

**Platform:** PlayStation/Windows/Xbox/macOS

**Genre:** Adventure

**Release Date:** July 19, 2022

**Developer:** BlueTwelve Studio

**Publisher:** Annapurna Interactive

**Creative Director:** Koola and Viv

**Game Writer:** Steven Lerner

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## Overview

**Stray is a third-person adventure game following a cat's journey into an underground cybercity.** The game starts with a **stray cat**, who accidentally fell into an underground city inhabited by robots when he was out scavenging with his family living on the surface. The cat wanted to find a way back to the surface and thus started his journey from the bottom of the underground city – the Slums. In the Slums, the cat encountered hordes of mysterious bacteria called “**Zurks**” that could eat and destroy everything they touched. The cat also befriended a robot named **B-12** in an abandoned lab. B-12 decided to travel together with the cat in order to recover its memory while helping his furry friend to get home.

Soon they discovered that humans had gone extinct, but those companion robots that humans built to serve themselves had developed their own society with similar social hierarchy. In the Slums (lower level of the city), they were welcomed by its residents and got in touch with a robot named **Momo**. Momo was a member of a group called “Outsiders”, most of the members have left the slums trying to find a better world outside the underground city. With the help and guidance of Momo and his friend **Doc**, the cat and B-12 avoided the pursuit by the predatory Zurks and escaped the slum successfully. Later, they traveled to the middle level of the city called Antvillage. They met **Zbaltazar**, who was also a member of the Outsider group. Zbaltazar gave them a photo and directed them to find another Outsider named **Clementine**, who was living in the upper level of the city – the Midtown.

The cat and B-12 arrived at Midtown, they found the lives of those robots living in Midtown were a lot more fun and luxurious than their counterparts in the Slums. However, Midtown was also controlled and censored by a police force called **Sentinels**.

The cat and B-12 found out that Clementine was a wanted “criminal” in Midtown, but they still managed to find her hideout. Clementine then asked the pair to steal the atomic battery from Neco corporation factory to power up a subway train leading up to the surface world. The cat and B-12 sneaked into the factory and stole the battery, but on their way back, they found out that Clementine’s friend **Blazer** betrayed her and sold her to the police. All 3 of them were then captured and sent to a jail controlled by the Sentinels.

The last part of the story started with the cat, B-12 and Clementine breaking out of the jail. Clementine left their group near the subway entrance to distract the police and helped the cat & B-12 to escape Midtown using a powered-up subway train. Finally, the two arrived at the top level in a building with a control room. B-12 recovered its memory and realized that he was a human scientist who lived here a long time ago. All the other humans died out due to a plague, except himself who uploaded his consciousness to the internet and survived. He decided to hack all the terminals in the control room and deactivate all the systems of this underground city. B-12 overloaded himself and died during the hacking, but the Sentinels were disabled; the roof of the underground city were opened. The sunlight killed the Zurks in the Slums. The cat returned home and those robots who lived their entire life in the dark underground city were finally free to go out and see the outside world.

## Characters

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### Main Protagonists:

**The Stray Cat** – A nameless cat who is separated from his family on the surface after accidentally falling into a sewer and trapped in an underground city occupied by robots.

- The cat is an **unconventional protagonist**, who indeed provides a unique perspective to the game world by being both a participant that drives the story and a silent observer who witnesses the story unfold without judgement. By playing the cat, the player enters an observer state in which consciousness is separated from the body, they control the cat but never understood him, since the cat (unlike human character) is narrated & portrayed through his actions instead of thoughts or ideas.
- It’s difficult to describe the cat as a character, the Cat shares many stereotypical cat traits like knocking stuff off the shelves, meowing at other creatures, and jumping around the ledges. The only thing that distinguishes him from other cats is probably his **strong compassion for other species**. Throughout the journey, the brave cat ventures into numerous dangerous places occupied by Zurks or Sentinels, knowing the risk of being eaten alive or shot to death, he still helps B-12 and other robots without complaining or asking for reward.
- Despite the robots calling themselves “Outsiders”, the cat is the true outsider in this game world: he used to live outside the city (the surface); as a different species, he is also an outsider to the robot (humanlike) society. If the Outsiders represent “Hope” in this dystopian world. The Cat is the ultimate hope and savior who can save the world from destruction.

**B-12** – A flying drone robot loaded with the consciousness of a human **scientist** from many years ago. He was rescued by the Cat in an abandoned lab in the Slum. Throughout the game, he acts as the Cat (player)’s translator and facilitates the communication between the Cat and robots. He also helps the cat perform actions that only robots/human could perform, like hacking doors/terminals, interacting and picking up items.

- As a companion he expands the affordance by greatly increasing the range of actions the player could do when interacting with the game world.
- **Redefining humans and their status in the new world:** As the only human in this city and possibly the last human alive in the game world, B-12 didn’t seek to resurrect himself in a new robot body and achieve the ultimate human dream of living forever. Instead, he willingly sacrifices himself for the lives of robots and the cat. His death symbolizes the destruction of a human-centered world where companion robots and cats are treated as inferior servants to the human race. A new world might emerge from this sacrifice – a place where the life of every sentient being (regardless of species) is equally valued and respected.

**Momo** –He is a companion robot living at the bottom level (Slum) of the underground city that is mostly infested with dangerous Zurks. He is the only Outsider who still stays inside the Slum due to his fear of going out to the danger zone infested with Zurks. Though he is pessimistic about getting out of the slum himself, he helped the cat and B-12 to gather info and escaped the slum through a sewer.

- Momo is a **Dreamer** to other residents of the slums – instead of worrying about their lives in the slums, Momo keeps trying to contact his Outsider friends via a transceiver. When other residents lose hope and refuse to believe the existence of the outside world, Momo never gives up his dream about escaping the city despite himself being fearful of the dangerous journey to the outside.
- Momo gradually regains courage after meeting the Cat and B-12. At the end of chapter 7, when the trio go into a sewer infested with Zurks, Momo stays behind to hold doors for his friends until their boat passes through the gate. Though Momo gives up his chance to escape the slum, he gains the courage that will eventually motivate him to start the journey on his own.

**Doc** – He is one of the Outsider members who lives in the danger zone of the Slum. He initially left home to test his weapons made for killing Zurks, but he is trapped outside by accident and couldn’t go home for years. The Cat and B-12 bring him home and let him reunite with his son **Seamus**. In return, he gives the Cat his invention – the Defluxor is powerful gun against Zurks. It proves to be extremely helpful when the Cat and B-12 are fighting their way out of the Slum.

- Doc as a **Scientist** exemplifies the possibility of bringing hope into a dystopian world through the power of technology and invention.
- Doc and Seamus’s **Father-Son** relationship shows the possibility of love and genuine familial relationships among sentient machines.

**Zbaltazar** – The third Outsider who lives in the middle level of the underground city, in an area called Antvillage, above the Slum and below Midtown. He spends most of his

time on meditation, though he no longer wishes to explore the outside world, he offers to help Cat and B-12 by pointing the way leading up to Midtown.

- Zbaltzar appears to be a **Hermit** who is free from the worries of living in this dystopian city and is genuinely satisfied with his life. Like other residents of Antvillage, he is safe, free and hopeful.
- Antvillage is a small **utopia within a big dystopia**, it's safe because it's gated and protected from the invasion of Zurks. Its lack of police presence means the residents are free from rules and censorship. Most of the residents are hopeful because they still believe there's a better world outside the village and their friend Clementine is leading a happy life in Midtown.

**Clementine** – She is the last Outsider who ventures the furthest away from the slums. She used to live with Zbaltazar in Antvillage but eventually decides to go up to Midtown and seek a way out to the surface world. She is wanted by the police in Midtown when the Cat and B-12 meet up with her. After stealing the battery from Neco factory, the three of them are sent to a jail controlled by the Sentinels. They help each other break out of the jail, and eventually, Clementine helps B-12 and the Cat to escape Midtown via a subway train. She stays behind to distract the police, despite of knowing she will get arrested again and ends up in jail.

- Clementine is seen as a **Hero** by the Outsiders and residents of Antvillage. She is brave, adventurous, compassionate, and smart. She demonstrates tremendous strength and strong will to combat the hopeless reality. She symbolizes **Hope** for everyone who wishes to overcome and escape the cruel dystopian city.
- On the other hand, she is a **Rebel and a Criminal** in Midtown. As a rebellious free spirit who constantly seeks freedom and new knowledge, she is completely the opposite of Sentinels (Midtown police), a group that strives to maintain the existing social order and enforce the old rules & traditions established by their human ancestors.

### **Antagonist:**

**Sentinels** – A police force in Midtown. They're an army of flying security drones equipped with laser weapons. They were originally created by the humans to keep the underground city safe, but many years after the humans die out, the security system and the sentinels are still functioning and imposing strict rules on the robot residents living in Midtown.

- The Sentinels is representative of a police force controlled by a totalitarian government seeking to impose its rules and belief on its citizens. They prosecute disbelievers like Clementine, they oppress its residents by banning the street dancers from dancing and playing loud music. They put cameras in the apartment buildings to monitor the residents and arrest rule breakers.

**Neco Corporations** – It's a company that offers garbage disposal service in the underground city. They pretend to recycle trash but in fact they're only dumping the trash into the lower level of the city (the Slum). In order to prevent the trash from piling up in the Slum, they create trash decomposing bacteria, which eventually becomes Zurks that

start to infest the city. The company was originally run by humans, but the humans are wiped out due to a plague. Many years after that, the robot workers are still working in the factory and keeping the shady business running.

**Zurks** – A group of mice-like creatures (bacteria) that eat buildings, robots and other living creatures. It's originally a trash decomposing bacteria created by the Neco Corporation, but somehow it evolves into dangerous creatures that destroy not only trash, but also everything else they come in contact with.

- **Human technology & Selfishness ends up destroying humans.**

Zurks represent the dangerous consequence when humans use technology for their selfish purposes. Neco Corp was supposed to recycle the trash instead of decomposing it by using dangerous bacterium. But the company chose the cheaper solution for itself sacrificing the environment & well-being of their fellow humans who lived at the bottom of the city. The company's selfish deed leads to a bigger disaster in the slums.

**Blazer** – He used to be one of the robot workers in the Neco Corp factory living in Midtown. At first, he appears to be a trusty friend of Clementine and helps the Cat & B-12 sneaking into the factory to steal the battery. However, at the end of the mission, he betrays the group by calling the police and sending them to jail.

- Blazer is cunning, selfish and snobbish, like many other upper-class residents living in Midtown, he is willing to sacrifice others for his personal gain. He lacks a sense of companionship and empathy for other robots, especially those who were inferior to him in terms of money and status. He embodies the value of Midtown- a self-interested and self-sustained upper-class neighborhood that cares nothing about the slums and those lower-class robots who suffered from poverty and disease.

## Breakdown

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### Part 1: Reimagining Dystopia without Humans

While many dystopian/post-apocalyptic games like *Fallout* and *Half-Life* series focus on exploring the relationship between human and machine, *Stray* offers a unique insight into this genre by reimagining a dystopia entirely run by robots after the extinction of humans. By removing human characters and decentralizing humans from the game narrative, the game subverts the old story formula which treats humans as the center of universe and thus justifying their action of turning other creatures into slaves that exist only to work for their human masters. Instead of diving into the complicated master-servant relationship between humans and companion robots, *Stray* starts the story at a time when the conflict between humans and other species no longer exists. It starts with a world that initially seems promising – the protagonists (cats and robots) consist of previous servants who finally gain their freedom in this new world without humans. What makes the beginning of the story most compelling is the complete subversion of the audience's expectation – when we expect this to be a fun adventure about an innocent cat and his silly friends, the game presents us a dystopian city filled with pollution, disease, dangerous predatory creatures, and fearful robot residents thriving on the dirty streets of

slums. This grime scenery makes us wonder - why in such a “utopia” devoid of slavery and human error, the residents are still leading a miserable life like their human predecessors?

## **Part 2: History Repeats Itself**

As the cat leaves the Slums and explores more neighborhoods in the city, we as players realize that this robot society depicted in the game is strikingly similar to our contemporary human society, almost like a mirror or perhaps a parody.

Just like some countries in the era of dictatorship and totalitarianism, Midtown appears to be a similar place where strict rules and social order are established by a centralized government, then censored and brutally enforced by its police/military force. In Midtown, we see signs of censorship and violation of individual freedom & privacy through the many security cameras installed in Clementine’s apartment building. The game even gives us a quest to destroy the security cameras for a group of fun-seeking street dancers. The reason to destroy the cameras is nothing serious – the street dancers complain about police (Sentinels) banning them from dancing to loud music, they want the Cat to destroy the cameras and give them a chance to dance and play music without being immediately shut down by the police. This silly story reveals an underlying social conflict in Midtown – some powerful group (Sentinels or the government behind it) that controls the city seeks to prevent its residents from having fun. The ruler distrusts the residents, and the residents grow fearful and resentful of the ruler.

The division between the rich and the poor, the lower and upper class in this robot society is also similar to the social division of our human society. In the Slums lives the typical lower-class robots: they scavenge for food and resources on a street littered with trash; they protect each other by staying in groups, and staying vigilant because the outer area of their neighborhood is infested with Zurks (bacteria) that could eat them alive. Their lack of resources and constant struggle against poverty & danger resemble the lives of lower-class humans. The Antvillage located between the Slums and Midtown is where the middle class resides – they have plenty of resources: trees, water and even flowers; the village is sealed and safe from the danger of Zurks; the residents spend more time on entertaining themselves (meditating, growing plants, or playing mahjong etc) instead of surviving. Midtown is where the upper-class residents live in the city, it could become a better utopia than Antvillage, but it’s corrupted by a greedy corporation, an intimidating police force, and its snobbish residents. It resembles those big human cities – diverse, resourceful, but also full of conflicts and power struggles. The Neco Corporation is in charge of Midtown’s trash disposal, but they dump trash into the Slums instead of spending money to recycle them; Blazer promises to help Clementine, but ends up turning her over to the police to receive a bounty. Residents and corporations alike, they are willing to sacrifice others (especially those who are weaker & inferior) for their own gains. It’s surprising to find out that not only humans are born with inequality due to social status, but also these robots who never inherit human culture yet seeks to divide themselves through a social structure that encourages the strong ones to benefit from exploiting the weak ones.

If we ask why history always repeats itself in a history class, we might get an answer saying it’s because human nature is similar at its core, and we as humans cannot help but keep making the same mistakes as our ancestors. However, the story of Stray proposes a

difficult question: why do the sentient robots who do not share the so-called “human nature” still repeat our miserable human history?

### **Part 3: The Value of Companionship and Compassion**

If we pay closer attention to the story, we realize the story essentially revolves around the topic of companionship. The robots are called “Companions”, created to help humans; the cats used to be humans’ furry companions & friends. The game mechanics further emphasize the value of companionship by pairing up the Cat with B-12. The Cat and B-12 accompanies each other on their journey, turning their weakness into strength by offering each other their complementary skills. The player controls the agile cat to help B-12 to navigate through the maze-like streets and escape from predators; the player also controls B-12 to interact with npcs, unlock quests and hack terminals to help the Cat find the right way. The companionship between the agile Cat and the intelligent B-12 is crucial in terms of both story and gameplay. Players experience the bond between the two not only through in-game narrative, but also through their physical experience of controlling the characters when overcoming gameplay challenges. This perfect marriage between narrative and gameplay reinforces the core value/theme the game intends to deliver to its audience.

Speaking of companionship, we might notice that the prime motivator behind companionship is a powerful emotion called compassion. Cambridge dictionary defines compassion as “a strong feeling of sympathy and sadness for the suffering or bad luck of others and a wish to help them” [3]. Throughout the game, we witness many touching moments that showcase the power of compassion: when the Cat helps a street musician to collect music sheets scattered around the Slums; when the Cat rescues Clementine and B-12 from their jail cells; when Clementine closes the gate to the subway station and surrenders herself to the police to help the Cat escape. Compassion among these sentient beings creates a positive loop that eventually turns bad circumstances into a hopeful tunnel that leads to happiness. By helping the robots we encounter on our journey and at the same time receiving helps from them in return – we gradually approach the good ending in which the Cat reunites with his family, meanwhile saving the lives of all the underground robots by opening up the underground city to sunlight and the outside world.

Now we can go back and answer the part 2 question: History repeats itself due to the lack of compassion between humans and robots, between lower-class and higher-class residents of the city. Any sentient beings who become intelligent and self-conscious enough to separate the Self from Others, and differentiate individual from its group will have to make a difficult decision when interacting with the outside world – should they help others despite of knowing other people are unrelated and unbeneficial to themselves? Or should they choose to help others altruistically out of a sense of compassion and fellowship? The answer already lies in the game story. The old humans become extinct because many of them do not care about the well-being of their fellow human beings, let alone the well-being of robots and other animal species. The humans refuse to help each other and work together to overcome the plague, they eventually die out one by one. The same tragedy happens again in the robots’ society – the robots divide themselves and build a society that prioritizes individual gain above the well-being of the group. They become the cause of each other’s misfortune and together drag the city

closer to its doomsday. In the end, what saves this hopeless dystopia from falling apart? The answer is compassion. B-12 helps the Cat, the Cat helps other robots, and the robots help B-12 and the Cat. Without the compassion they share for each other and the help they offer, the protagonists wouldn't be able to achieve the impossible task of saving a dystopian city.

## **Strongest Element**

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### **Unique Choice of Player Character**

The game offers a unique, fun and memorable player experience by letting the player interact with the game world as a cat. This use of non-human player characters could redefine the meaning of "playable characters" by encouraging more studios to think outside the box and adopt a wider range of playable characters that goes beyond the concept of humans and humanoids. I believe the use of more varied player characters would bring fresh perspectives & tremendous narrative potential to future games.

### **Environmental Storytelling**

Instead of directly telling the player the story, the story is broken down into narrative pieces that are hidden throughout the game world, told through the npcs' dialogues, collectible notes and graffiti painted on the walls. This clever presentation of narrative elements encourages the player to interact and explore the game world and thus creating a better sense of immersion.

## **Unsuccessful Element**

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### **Unsatisfying Ending due to Unanswered Questions**

The last area of the game – the control room and the lab-like building seem to be a missed narrative opportunity. This is the 1<sup>st</sup> time in the entire game we see true companion robots without self-consciousness. Unlike their counterparts in the lower level of the city, the robots in the control room are performing their routine work and repeating robotic dialogues without signs of self-awareness. Due to their lack of agency and inability to explain the situation, players start to doubt whether they have come to the right place. Usually at the end of a hero's adventure, there's a boss or some wise guy who understands the world and explains everything that happened to the player in the previous journey, but in Stray, the player arrives at a place without meeting a single boss/mastermind who is knowledgeable enough to answer the remaining questions they had about the world and their journey. The player is left wondering if there's a bigger boss behind these unresponsive robots in the control room, and whether there's an unfinished story cut by the dev team due to the shortage of time and resources.

## **Highlight**

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### **An Ending that Reinforces the Theme**

The most powerful story moment happens near the end of the game in chapter 12: As B-12 hacks the terminals in the control room, the roof (artificial sky) above the massive underground city gradually opens. The robot residents see the real sky for the 1<sup>st</sup> time in



their lives. Sunlight shines through the roof, eliminating the Zurks infestation in the Slums, the Sentinels who are about to arrest Clementine fall to the ground due to the deactivation of the security system. Finally, B-12 also falls to the ground and sacrifices himself in the process of saving everyone else.

All the obstacles and challenges we go through in the previous chapters are building up for this single powerful scene, reminding us that our effort is paid off because we finally find Hope. The scene embodies the core value of the story and delivers a key message to its audience: the compassion shared among different species and the help they offered to each other is the ultimate hope that saves the world from utter destruction.

## Critical Reception

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GameSpot 9/10

Alessandro Barbosa from GameSpot described Stray as a touching story centered around the topic of empathy and companionship: “It’s a consistently satisfying adventure with a charming story about companionship that rarely misses a beat across its well-paced runtime.” [1]

IGN – 8/10

Tom Marks from IGN praised the use of environmental storytelling and admitted the game world was full of interesting stories and rich history:

“This is a wonderfully rich world, one I really enjoyed learning all about. While your cat’s own story is a pretty simple tale of a lost adventurer trying to get home, the conflict you end up stumbling into is very well told. The beautifully designed city you have to make your way through is bleak without feeling pessimistic, full of history to learn and charming robot citizens to chat with despite the fairly dystopian situation around them. I talked to everyone I could, whether they were relevant to the story or not, and I loved seeing what their computer screen faces would display as I excitedly meowed around their feet, be that annoyance, surprise, or just a big heart.” [2]

## Lessons

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**Lesson 1** The non-human player characters have a lot of potential for unique gameplay and story. They could potentially attract a larger audience.

- Moving around and interacting with the world as a Cat is one of the main hooks for the game. The use of cat protagonist not only attracts hardcore and casual players, but it also attracts many non-player animal lovers. The game finds a whole new group of audience and introduces them to the charming world of narrative adventure game.

**Lesson 2** Game is a powerful medium that could translate and elevate reality through artistic expression.

- Using the robot’s humanlike society as an example, Stray offers us an artistic depiction of realistic social issues presents in the modern human society.
- If players are aware of the social issues in our society, they will be able to sympathize with the characters in the game world. The mix-match of fiction and

reality creates a stronger sense of player immersion. The story intrigues players by letting them experience something both familiar and uncanny.

## Summation

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Through the journey of a stray cat and his robot friends, Stray tells an emotionally overwhelming story about Dystopia, hope and companionship. Could a corrupted world be saved from its downfall and catastrophe? The game gives us a hopeful answer by demonstrating the tremendous power of companionship and compassion shared among sentient beings.

## Reference

- [1] <https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/stray-review-nine-lives/1900-6417917/?ftag=CAD-01-10abi2f> Stray Review - Nine Lives by GameSpot
- [2] <https://www.ign.com/articles/stray-review> IGN review of Stray
- [3] <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/compassion> Cambridge Dictionary - definition of Compassion