

# **Game Diary:**

## ***The Pale Beyond***

**Rover Vos 12235834**

**Issues in Game Studies: Video Game Genres**

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I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this work; no assistance other than that permitted has been used and all quotes and concepts taken from unpublished sources, published literature or the internet in wording or in basic content have been identified with precise source citations.

Rover Vos 25/06/2023

## 1st entry 8th of April

### Game Play

Dear diary, today I started to play *The Pale Beyond* (Bellular Studios 2023). So far it's a very interesting game with many different and novel mechanics which could on their own establish a whole genre. I have never played a game like this before so everything is new to me. One of the notable mechanics I found is how the game saves. The game works with weeks (Something like a chapter) and after each week the game saves itself to the tree. Besides that, the game can't be saved. This is very reminiscent of older games like *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo 1983) which use levels you can play again and again. However, there is one important difference here. There are many impactful decisions to be made in the game which (I think) change the outcome of the game/story. For now, I expect that whenever you complete a week it gets saved to the tree (create a branch) and that you then can come back to that save state to try and do things differently compared to last time and create more branches. I now question if there is a fully encompassing tree that has all possible route options. I'm not very excited about the game yet, but I'm curious to see where it goes.

Errata 23/06/203

Oh, how someone can change over one semester.

## 2nd entry 10th of April

### Cultural Exploration

Let's take a look at where *The Pale Beyond* originates from. It was developed by *Bellular Studios*, a very new studio founded in 2021 by Michael Bell and Thomas Hislop. However, I think it was born from *coffee box games ltd*. I say this because the LinkedIn page of Thomas Hislop says he works for "Bellular Studios (Coffee Box Games LTD)" which was founded in 2015. I couldn't find anything about it online. Michael Bell is one of the biggest *World of Warcraft* YouTubers which is most likely why this game had such an explosive start as a new studio. With over 600k subscribers there is a large audience to sell your game to. Looking at the launch a lot of people bought the game and the game is overwhelmingly positive on Steam, however, it was riddled with bugs and some are still here. So I question if the overwhelmingly positive rating is because it's Bellular or because the game is really good. Bugs were taken care of nicely as they set up a discord server for people and the developers to talk about them. Another reason why the game was a success at launch is Steam. Apparently Steam really boosts indie games' success by placing them on the front page as explained by Bellular in a YouTube video named "We Released Our First Game On Steam: Real Stats Revealed".

### 3rd entry 11th of April

#### Game Play

Dear diary, today I continued playing *The Pale Beyond* and it felt lacking. Before I started playing this game I looked up how long the game is, about 6 to 8 hours of gameplay. Now I'm 2 hours into the game and I feel like I'm still in the tutorial of the game. Story-wise the game is going places and it's developing very nicely, many different interesting role-play decisions have been made. But I have no agency over what happens in the game outside of roleplay decisions. I have been introduced to some resource mechanics, but no way of gaining these resources, which feels really weird if not a bit frustrating. For example, I have a supply of food which is spent to feed the crew of the ship. I use 50% off the max supplies each week to feed them (If I want to keep my crew happy that is, I could feed them less). I also have 14 hunting/sledge dogs. We are sailing through the ice so the people can go out and hunt food, but I can't send them out to hunt for food. I question why the developers decided to make the mechanics like this. Will these mechanics open up at some point? Won't that be too late? Are these mechanics may be here to make the player feel a certain way? That last question might actually be the case. I'm the new first mate of the ship, while most people on the ship have sailed together for some time. I'm still exploring who everyone is and what is happening on the ship, which is also strange because, after 2 weeks on an isolated ship, I still haven't met everyone.

#### 4th entry 12th of April

##### Game Play

Dear diary, today *The Pale Beyond* became a very strategic game. The problems I had in the previous entry have been solved. Apparently, you need to play for about 3 hours to finish the prologue and then you get access to everything as you become the captain of the ship. Many different mechanics popped up. I can now assign crew to do different tasks which I at first couldn't do, I can send crew out to explore the ice, hunt for food, help in the kitchen, heal people, and a lot more. All these mechanics are joined by a narrative structure and everything you do, each choice you make, has an impact on the crew in multiple ways. If you talk to your crew properly they become loyal to you, they start to follow you, and if you mistreated them they will become disloyal to you. The crew has many different possible statuses (Starvation, wounded, frozen, etc.) which all can appear through your narrative and strategic choices, which in this game are a lot of the time the same. Making the whole a beautiful genreverschmelzung (Beil 2015, 50-52).

Errata 19/06/2023.

The last sentence about genreverschmelzung is a bit misplaced here. My understanding back then was a bit different. About genreverschmelzung and genre in general. But what I try to get at is the fact that all these mechanics mentioned are (part of different) genres and the way they combine them is a genreverschmelzung. Later I found the term ludonarrative resonance which is a better fit (Watssman 2012, n.p.).

## **5th entry 13th of April**

### **Game Play**

Dear diary, today I died. The ship was taken over by the winter and crushed within the ice. Everyone on board succumbed to the cold. I never expected this game to have a lose condition. Or at least to have a full-blown everyone is dead game over moment. If the whole crew slowly dies from different strategic mistakes I could imagine losing the game. It was an interesting moment, as one of my crew members was already about to die of malnourishment, but then my whole crew died. I wasn't expecting this and I think it might have affected me to change how I play this game and enjoy future story-driven games. It significantly changed my mood from casual gaming to a more serious story enjoying mood, if that makes sense. I was just playing the game as a mechanics gamer(I am a very mechanics-first type of gamer), not a narrative enjoyer. When my whole crew died, I saw a pop-up for each crew member that died one by one while this amazing accordion music was playing and that moment stuck with me. Games still have many lessons to learn me/us, ranging anywhere from life to games themselves.

## 6th entry 14th of April

### Game Play

Dear diary, today I died again. The decorum of the crew was low and thus the crew tore itself apart. This game is harder than I was expecting it to be. It is more of a strategy(Survival?) game than it is a roleplaying game, which is not what I was expecting at all. To such an extent that it almost feels unfair sometimes, as you only have a very limited amount of actions you can take. But trying to survive on the ice at almost -30°C is unfair. The game even told me that it's possible to turn off this type of loss condition in the options. I don't think I will, I like a bit of a challenge. The game is finally starting to show its true colour. It truly is a strategy game and all the genre cues(Frow 2015) point towards it. As I have never really played a strategy game like this I will take a gander as to what possible genre cues for strategy games could be from this game.

Crew management, what does each crew member do, how do I keep them alive, how do I keep them happy and alive.

Resource management, food and full, but also the decorum of the crew and their opinion of you.

Making the big decisions, where are we going, what are we going to prioritise, who will take on the danger, who will die.

### Errata 23/06/2023

Kinda funny how I only mentioned strategy here and just mentioned survival once. Because *The Pale Beyond* is a strategy game but also a survival game, which back when I wrote it wasn't clear to me yet. Also, the genre cues I took for strategy are kinda off. They are more for simulation and RPG.

Also interesting to see here that I split the mechanics and roleplay elements. Apparently, it didn't click in my head yet that they are the same.



## **7th entry 16th of April**

### **Game Play**

Dear diary, today I was rather annoyed by The Pale Beyond. I made some mistakes earlier in the game and now I had to go back several weeks using the save tree system. Which by the way is very different from what I expected in my first entry. It's just a straight line with a dot for each week. If you go back to another week all your progress after that week is deleted. So why was I annoyed by the fact that I had to backtrack? In this game, it's important to talk with your crew, very important. Talking to your crew creates different situations and changes their demeanour. It also how the game explains things to the player in a narrative way. In addition, talking to your crew is a way to prepare for what is to come, a lot of foreshadowing happens when you speak to your crew. Having to interact with the crew in the same way I did previously(for the most part) just to make sure that their demeanour towards me is good, reading what they have to say again and eventually just skipping parts of it so that I can get to the new stuff, feels annoying. The ludonarrative structure within the game in general has been done very well, all the mechanics are a means for the narrative. But at this point, ludonarrative dissonance peaked around the corner (Hocking 2007, n.p.). I think this problem is a very unique problem for the genre of narrative games that work with loose conditions and save states. Other games that have this as far as I know have the goal to be difficult and for people to repeat the same thing until victory.

## 8th entry 17th of April

### Theoretical Approach

Dear diary, today I want to take a look at the book *Writing for video game genres* (Despain 2009.). This book describes different aspects that are relevant to genres (With a focus on writing) and I want to take a look at all the genres that the publisher of *The Pale Beyond* uses. Which are Adventure, RPG, Strategy, Simulation and Indie (Not in this book).

The first chapter I will look at is Chapter 3 *Writing for Adventure Games* by Lee Sheldon. Sheldon starts by talking about the player's character. The player character should make sense in the world they will inherit, well Robin Shaw makes more than sense to be in this world. They are a sailor looking for a job. However, the role they take on is a bit of a weird one. As Robin is the new first mate and later captain of a crew who has been sailing together for years. This creates an interesting dynamic where he needs to earn their respect even do Robin doesn't know the first thing about this crew. This comes to the second point of creating a character who doesn't know everything. As the player all you know at the beginning is that you are sailing to the Antarctic in search of great glory. You don't know the crew, the captain, the mission, how long it will take, your chance of survival, how to be a first mate/captain, etc. Everything is a mystery and throughout the game, you will learn more and more about all of these points. Which adds a beautiful layer of mystery to the game.

Mystery also leaks into the player character them self which correlates with another point by Sheldon. As a writer, you should not write a whole player character. Leave space for interpretation by the player and space to fill in their personality. In *The Pale Beyond*, this is actually one of the most important aspects, the character only has three aspects that are set in stone, where they were born, what their past work experience is and their name Robin Shaw. The rest is for the player to interpret and create through interaction with the world. I also use gender-neutral pronouns in this text, because the character is always addressed in that way in the game.

Players should be capable/wanting to identify with the player character. Or as Sheldon says players should want to slip into their shoes. The fact that the character is very mysterious and its identity is unknown allows most players to vibe with the character as the player can create their own view of the character. I see Robin Shaw as a male character who tries to make sure the whole crew is happy but is starting to be challenged by the crew as things are getting worse and worse. However, keeping hope is important, if you don't as the captain no one will.

The last couple of points are to avoid cliches and stereotypes which I haven't seen any of in the game. You could however make decisions in the game to shape your avatar around a stereotype.

I'll cut this entry "short" here and continue with it in my next diary entry.

## 9th entry 18th of April

### Theoretical Approach

As we talked about the player character in the last entry let's now talk about the non-player characters in adventure games.

Sheldon divides Non-Player characters(NPCs) into major characters and minor characters. Major characters would be people that are relevant to the story and to the player character. While minor characters are the NPCs that fill up the world with life. In *The Pale Beyond*, there are 11 major characters and 15 minor characters. This is set in stone as far as I know, because everyone is part of the crew. Characters from both groups can however die without having to reload a save.

All the major characters are very unique, they all have their own amazing art, personalities, stories, goals and identities. I think this creates an amazing world to explore and really helps create an affective relationship with the NPCs. Interacting with these characters requires a lot of takt, they all respond differently to your actions. Some require a soft touch while others require an iron first to show them that you are the captain of this ship. With one of the mechanics being loyalty to you which is per character basis you really need to learn the major characters and their personalities to get them to trust you or they will break the decorum of the crew apart and the mission will fail. You are not only fighting the weather you are also fighting the crew(Figuratively speaking).

Sheldon mentions that the major characters should be part of how to solve puzzles. And in a later part of his chapter, he explains what a puzzle is in an adventure game. The puzzles in *The Pale Beyond* come from the interactions with the Major NPCs. All major characters have problems that need to be "solved". Some come in the form of tangible things that are needed but a lot of the issues arise from emotional struggles. Crew members fight among themselves, struggling with depression, losing hope, etc. Most problems have one requiring structure to solve: NPC 1 will have a problem, NPC 2 mentions it and NPC 2/3 gives you advice on how to potentially solve it. However, there are also some unexpected problem that you might not even know was a problem until the resolution of it. And by keeping your crew's morale high and making the crew loyal to you the resolution will be positive.

Minor characters in *The Pale Beyond* are not very minor. They have their own personalities, their own goals, needs, wants, etc. They help you solve puzzles of the major characters and can sometimes be/have their own puzzle. The only reason I classify them as minor characters is because the player can't change their loyalty towards you. They are loyal to

one of the major characters and if the major character is loyal to you so is the minor character.

## 10th entry 19th of April

### Theoretical Approach

Death in games is something we as players have come to see as normal. You die in almost all games, because you get killed, fall down, fail a puzzle, etc. There are many different ways for your character to “die”. With death, I don’t only mean for your character to die in the sense of the word, but more as a lose condition. I have been questioning while playing this game if death should even be part of story-based games. The purpose is to tell a story after all. Sheldon says “Avatar death adds nothing to the gameplay”(Despain 2009, 23). Which for most story-based games I would agree with, however for *The Pale Beyond* I think it has a good purpose because you don’t die all the time. The death of the crew and the player avatar happens over a long period of time. Your crew dies, because of an accumulation of strategic mistakes which can take multiple hours of playtime to show their effects. Your avatar “dies” either, because the decorum of the crew is fully depleted which happens in the same way as how your crew dies. Or by pre-written moments in the game, for example, you decide not to leave the ice and it melts away under your feet and everyone dies. Game Over. I think the death of the crew is a very important part of the game as it creates tension in the game. It’s also the reason why I started to enjoy the game. The pre-written moments in the game where you can die, are I think fine. Those moments are extremely foreshadowed by the crew and give agency to the player. If you wouldn’t die by making those mistakes or the game saves you, your agency as the captain of the ship disappears which I think is more important than not having death in the game. Most importantly why I think death is somewhat good in this game is, because of how the save system works, you can’t just quicksave/load every 2 minutes

## 11th entry 25th of April

### Theoretical Approach

Is *The Pale Beyond* a puzzle game? This is something I asked my audience during my presentation. So why would I ask this? It started with a quote by Sheldon "Puzzles are the heart and soul of adventure games." (Despain 2009, 25). This piqued my curiosity to see if all adventure games or just *The Pale Beyond* can be classified as puzzle games.

To figure this out let's first take a look at what is a puzzle.

Schell says that puzzles have one thing in common they make the player stop and think (Schell 2020, 252). *The Pale Beyond* definitely makes you stop and think for different reasons. Some examples: You have a narrative moment and need to think about which response you want to give; Which strategic choice do I want to take next; Debating the moral implications of things that happen in the game. These three are very different examples, the first example could very well be a puzzle, but that depends on the point of view of the player. What is their goal? But that concept of what is the player's goal already removes it from the good puzzle list. A good puzzle needs to have a clear goal (Schell 2020, 255). But a bad puzzle is still a puzzle. The second example is already way closer to being a puzzle. There is a clear goal, get the best outcome whatever that is. However, there are many different outcomes and who decides which outcome is the best? Kim said that "A puzzle is fun, and has a right answer" (Kim 2005, 1). Looking at the second bit and further reading his text we find that he doesn't say that a puzzle should have one answer, just a right answer. The last example is well part of the puzzle of the universe and the school of philosophy which is way too big of a puzzle to discuss here.

The key thing I found in the last paragraph is "that depends on the point of view of the player". This is a common thing in game studies, genre studies and puzzles. We don't know much.

"A puzzle is fun, and has a right answer." I think this sentence is the key to what I'm looking for. A puzzle. Meaning one puzzle. *The Pale Beyond* and many other adventure games have many puzzles in them, but the games themselves are not a puzzle. They are an amalgamation of many puzzles. You could even say that the puzzle genre is part of the adventure genre.

This topic is way too big for one diary entry. I guess we didn't get any closer to a definition of what a game/puzzle is, but my understanding has increased. Woohoo exp!

## 12th entry 25th of April

### Theoretical Approach

Dear diary, in an earlier entry I talked about Ludonarrative resonance, let's go a bit deeper into that(Watssman 2012, n.p.). Each action the player takes in *The Pale Beyond* has both narrative and mechanical consequences. This creates something called ludonarrative resonance. This can be seen in all NPC interactions, however, the player never knows if a specific interaction with an NPC has mechanic consequences until after the interaction. This increases the amount of resonance/immersion in the game, as the player never really knows how an NPC will react. Furthermore, all choices that are mechanical have an effect on the narrative as depending on your strategic choices, the crew's mood, behaviour and/or health status will change. The most obvious is the crew will die if you make too many strategic mistakes and that will lead to the player having fewer narrative options and the other NPCs becoming demoralized which then again changes the story. *The Pale Beyond* is a slippery slope to death, as all the player's failures will snowball into other failures. The NPCs will also act differently when crew members die. You can also make narrative choices that will make the crew dislike you which means they will be less useful or even unavailable for mechanical actions.



### **13th entry 8th of May**

#### Theoretical Approach

Robin Shaw is the player character in *The Pale Beyond*. Who are they? Well, the player doesn't know. There are 3 known facts about Robin. Where were they born, what is their work experience and their name. All other facts are decided upon during gameplay. When the player interacts with the NPCs they will sometimes be asked a question. For example "Your not married are you Shaw?" Here the player can respond with 3 different answers which boil down to: Yes, No, Used to be. This is the way the game creates the player avatar and depending on the choices the NPC will have different dialogues in the future. What I find very interesting about is that the player can decide in their head whatever character type they want to give to Robin and it should work out most of the time(I think). You can be a kind soul, an iron-fisted leader or you can decide to be a mischievous liar and lie at every possible moment. Saying you are married, even do Robin isn't married in your head. The game really allows you to create your own hero. This type of player character is known as a shell avatar(Schallegger 2016, 45). An avatar befitting the RPG genre.

## 14th entry 10th of May

### Theoretical Approach

Daniel Erickson said that the definition of the RPG genre is: "A story-based game wherein the player creates and takes on a role that he has chosen, making decisions and actions that affect the game's outcome." (Despain 2009, 12). This fully encompasses *The Pale Beyond*. The game is story-driven. The player creates their character at the start by answering two questions and during the game by answering questions. Lastly, almost all decisions have an impact on the story. So *The Pale Beyond* is an RPG game, right? This definition does, however, this definition also make it so that *World of Warcraft* and other self-proclaimed RPG games aren't part of the RPG genre (Blizzard, 2004). Also, these days if you would ask people what an RPG game is they will most likely answer with a game where your player character has stats allowing you to make your own character. *The Pale Beyond* certainly doesn't have stats. And the character creation choices are very minimal. Maybe for a game to be part of a genre it doesn't need to be fully in line with the genre definition, but only with parts of it. A genre should give a feeling towards what the game will be like to play. Just as with movies, a romance/comedy/action movie come with a certain emotional journey when watching it.

Bonus: My inner thoughts while writing this: *At his point what is a genre? Someone really should write a book that has all **infinite** many genres explained and we should stick to it.*

## 15th entry 10th of May

### Theoretical Approach

Making meaningful choices in RPG games is one of the key parts of the genre. And games for that matter, otherwise we are watching a movie. But to be part of the RPG genre the choices need to be meaningful. Erickson gives 4 key elements to good choices in RPG games (Despain 2009, 13). Choices should matter, all choices should be specific, every choice should be valid and let the player be self-destructive. *The Pale Beyond* gets a 3 out of 4 from me. Let's look at some examples of the game that I encountered.

One of the key topics I talk about in this whole diary again and again is that the choices of the game are very much relevant and present so let's not dwindle any further on that.

One of the problems I have had during NPC interaction is that my responses to the NPCs are not always super clear. Sometimes I picked an option and a lot more was behind that choice than I was expecting it to be. Or I was expecting a response to be sarcastic, but it was death serious. Fixing this wouldn't be an easy feat or practical. Because that would mean that instead of showing a summary of what your character will say you will have to show the whole sentence and the outcome. Which removes most if not all value of the first point.

Every choice should be valid, this is one of the things I really like. Each choice is true and leads to a different outcome in the game. Even if a choice leads to the credits before the end of the game it still feels like a real ending. You Robin Shaw, the player made a mistake and this is how your story ends. You then have the option to go back to a save, but what happened was still a proper ending. You landed there through an accumulation of strategic mistakes.

My most memorable moment in the game is when I made the stupid decision to stay on the ship even do the crew told me to get off the ship and onto the ice. Resulting in a game over screen. This was a very affective moment and very empowering as I finally realised that there is more to this game than just reading what everyone is saying.

## **16th entry 11th of May**

### **Game Play**

Dear diary, the last 20 weeks were the toughest yet. Almost everyone succumbed to the winter, however, we made it. Summer has come, the ice is melting and we set sail once again. Today's play session was the longest so far, with 4 hours of uninterrupted playing. A lot happened, but the most important thing that happened is the theme of those 4 hours. It felt like a wrap-up of the story, which it might just be. A lot of very affecting and dramatic things happened. There was a lot of talking with the crew and a lot of convincing them. I had to convince some of the crew to leave things behind and others(Yes plural) to not walk out into the cold. Luckily I managed to keep everyone around. Other than that and most importantly I had to make some choices, difficult choices. With the loss of our dogs being the most memorable. As we were setting sail once more, but this time in three small rescue ships we didn't have the space to bring all our dogs. We had to choose to leave them behind on the melting ice to their end. Or take matters into our own hands. As a crew, we did the latter. Everyone took turns and everyone took part.

## 17th entry 24th of May

### Game Play

Dear diary today I finished *The Pale Beyond*. I started the game with some reluctance and no motivation to play, however, when I started the game up I instantly got affected by the music of the game and that kept me going for 5 hours(I would go and talk about affect here, but that's in another ~~castle~~ course). I'm not sure yet if I like the ending. It was some interesting writing. Mechanically speaking at some point you are done with the strategy mechanics and then the payoff phase of the story starts, which took quite some time. At this point, all your hard work of keeping your crew alive, happy and loyal starts to pay off. Multiple life-and-death situations came up which end differently depending on how you interacted with the crew along the way. Multiple ending defining choices are made and depending on which choices you make you finally get to know what your goal of this expedition is. Up to this point, all you knew was that you are here to retrieve a research ship without knowing what kind of research there is on that ship. Well, this ship found something very special, a special type of tree with fruit. If you eat this fruit you go back in time and have the opportunity to do everything again. See if you can do better this time, keep everyone alive, maybe make someone loyal to you, or don't go on this expedition at all. Or whatever else you want to do with this fruit. The game tests the player here, by giving you the opportunity to either eat the fruit, burn the tree or bring it back to civilization. What would you pick if you had this opportunity? I chose to burn the tree, as I think something like this is not something that should exist in this world(or any world at that).

A little loop back to my first entry, the save system. If you eat the tree the save system becomes tainted meaning you now don't just have one timeline which is your story, but you can make a tree. This is something I didn't want to do, but as it's quite useful for university-related things I did it anyways after doing my preferred ending.

## 18th entry 2nd of June

### Theoretical Approach

Let's try to break one of the genres of *The Pale Beyond*. On the Steam page, the game has 5 official genres. Adventure, RPG, Strategy, Simulation and Indie. I talked a lot about adventure and RPG. I also mentioned strategy here and there as something of a synonym for mechanics/choices. I really don't like the indie genre, because it has nothing to do with describing the game only the people that made it (I guess that already somewhat breaks it, but as a genre). So let's try to break Simulation.

To me before writing this entry, simulation games are games where the players take a job/activity and perform that. For example *Power Wash Simulator* (FuturLab. 2022.) and *Microsoft Flight Simulator* (Asobo Studio. 2020.). And thus *The Pale Beyond* is not a simulation game. However, reading Wolf instantly makes *The Pale Beyond* a management simulation game (Wolf 2001). "Balance the use of limited resources to build or expand some kind of community, institution or empire, while dealing with internal forces or external forces such as those of nature or chance (Wolf 2001, 126).". *The Pale Beyond* is quite true to this as our entire goal is to survive The pale beyond (Yes this is both the title of the game and the name of the place the game takes place).

A second approach lets take a look at the Steam genre Simulation games. There are racing games, shooters, dating sims, sports games, survival games, MMORPG's, adventure games, any game with a simulator in the title and much more. I might have taken the wrong genre to break, as apparently, all games are part of the simulation genre. And you don't even have to try hard to say that. All games simulate some activity from football to fighting dragons.

So where do we draw the line? What is and what isn't a simulation game? I think games that simulate something that someone could actually (Keeping money/accessibility out of the equation) do in real life could be classified as a simulation game. An F1 racing game for example. But games where you use magic, fight dragons, etc. Shouldn't be part of the simulation genre as you're not simulating something you could do, you are offering something unique about the world of gaming. One last thought here, what about animal simulators? If you play an animal in a game is that also a simulation game?

Instead of breaking the genre, I trod upon the boundary of the genre, which I think is quite a valuable experience.

## 19th entry 4th of June

### Cultural exploration

Let's take a look at the Steam review, but only negative reviews. This is going to be a doozy. In Steam I filter by Negative Only and most recent. I quickly found that if I do most helpful I find many reviews that talk about the bugs the game used to have which aren't interesting to talk about at all. The following are some of the recurring subjects among the reviews.

The game is too good for itself to be wanting to replay. The game makes the player feel like wanting to be done with all this \*\*\*\*. But Robin Shaw can't do that, they need to lead the crew to victory, even do everyone becomes very annoying and touchy near the end. Interacting with the NPCs can become very emotional and consuming which is why some people gave this game a negative review. Replaying it, even given a very nice system to do so is still too much of a drag. People don't want to play this game again. I can very much agree, after finishing I was done. I kinda wanted to see the other endings, but realizing that I would have to go through another emotional roller coaster, having to talk to the people I saved again, in the hopes everything will come to a good solution was not worth the trouble.

"Interface sucks" Ah yes people on Steam always give great reviews.

People are angry about the dogs. I can agree, I wanted to save them all.

Many of the reviews talk about how they dislike the resource management system. They say it's too clunky, doesn't have a good overview, the UI is terrible, etc. Which yah I can agree with. From an HCI perspective, it is really lacklustre. But I like to look at why it's a good thing it's those things. It's a more realistic view of how it really would be on such an expedition. Feeling annoyed by a game mechanic whose design goal it is to convey that feeling is a good thing right? On such a mission you won't have written documentation of how much food you have left, because well all the ink is frozen.

I have been called weird before for finding it cool when a game has some bad system if it helps the immersion. Even if something is bad from a design perspective it could still be the best for the game. By the way, I doubt that the developers made a "bad" UI for that reason. I think they are just inexperienced

It's funny to see that some people are disappointed in the survival mechanics. They are not hard enough, there aren't enough mechanics and it's too easy. This being my first management survival game and having zero issues with the system might make it easy, but I also read a lot about people saying it is too difficult. My zero experience doesn't really count

as I played thousands of hours of competitive games and those skills transfer. I'm not sure if it would be better for the game if it was harder, because that would mean that another issue people have, having to go back into the story to a previous save would become more prevalent. I think currently it has a nice balance, at least for someone of my skill level. I died 3 times and made it to the end with my whole crew at the end.



## 20th entry 5th of June

### Theoretical Approach

An idea. All genres are an amalgamation of mechanics. If you take the genres by Wolf which are more mechanics than genres, mixing them together they become genres as we use them today (Wolf 2001). Most genres these days are broad classifications of a game and experienced gamers expect certain mechanics to come with these genres. Which used to be why we classified games with genres like Capturing, Catching and Dodging. But now if I say Competitive FPS you can expect all of those genres to be part of this genre.

Oke let's stop writing about that. I thought of the concept above myself, but then started rereading Todorov and quickly found that this exact idea is in his book (Todorov, 1976). So let's build a little bit upon it instead of rewriting his work. Something unique about the genres of games and games, in general, is mechanics. Watching a movie/play or reading a book doesn't come with mechanics. Well sometimes they do, interactive theatre, choose your own story books, etc. Back to games. Super down-to-earth mechanics like capturing, evolved into a genre without having its roots in other genres. Todorov says that genres come from other genres, but I'm not able to see from which genre this "base" genre comes. I do agree that this comes through discourse. Because people talking about these games, where you capture something, slowly over time start to call it a capturing game and then it became a genre.

So what I would like to add to the studies of genre least for games is the concept that there are *base genres* something like a set of building blocks which if combined become greater genres. You can however not use these blocks to truly classify larger genres, because you can not limit a genre to its mechanics.

## 21st entry 8th of June

Cultural exploration

Dear diary, today I took a look at a review by Alexis Ong from Polygon(Ong 2023).

Ong wrote a review on *The Pale Beyond* and there are a couple of points I would like to comment on because they differ from my experience or just pique my interest. First off they mention that the game is very unpolished with UX problems, grammatical errors, bugs, etc. which is something I never encountered. The game was known at release to have many bugs, but also that the developers were quick to fix them. So most likely all the mentioned problems were fixed in between this review and me playing the game. Another interesting thing is that they didn't like the save tree and their argument is very understandable. If the player makes many strategic mistakes and realizes that everything isn't going to work out with the current situation the player can't just go back one or two weeks and try again. It's most likely that a mistake was made numerous weeks earlier and now you have to backtrack all those weeks in search of where it went wrong. This is both a blessing and a curse as it makes the impact of the player's choice more important, but it also makes it very very frustrating if the player isn't very skilled/experienced with these types of games and thus fails a lot, which is what happened to this reviewer.

Another point Ong mentioned was the ending, which indeed is very lacklustre and weirdly placed. The entire game is very grounded, you are just a bunch of sailors on an expedition. And now at the end, the game breaks the 4th wall with this mythical tree that can revert time and becomes the save system. Referencing back to entry 16, yes I dislike the ending. At least the tree.

One absurd side note here. I totally forgot to talk about one mechanic that appears consistently throughout the game and is very important. Taking requests. It's a simple, novel mechanic where at the start of each week some of your crew will come to you and make a request or report on the results of their previous request. Simple things like "Next week is a holiday can we have a feast?" to very heavy and dark subjects like suicidal thoughts that someone in the crew has are being discussed here. Your role as the captain is to then make a decision about what the course of action is going to be and a lot of the time the course of action depends on your available resources.

## 22nd entry 12th of June

Cultural exploration

*Bellular Studios* made a lot of YouTube videos about their game. About the game, their development process and other stuff. So I took a look at “We Barely Survived Making Our First Game...”(Bellular Studios, 2023.). There they showcase how everything doesn't always go as planned and how they almost failed to make their game. Many lessons learned are talked about for game development so those are nice to take with me for the future.

The vision of *The Pale Beyond* didn't come easy it took a long time and an entire other game which has never been released to then have a singular thought followed by 25 minutes of brainstorming to come up with their perfect vision. Filled by a childhood memory now fully ready to face the world of game development with pure motivation.

Takeaway one: *Just keep going something will come up, as long as you keep going.*

The story is based on the Imperial transatlantic expedition and how they somehow managed to keep everyone alive during that expedition even do everything was against them. The developers came to realize that that was because of leadership. Which is why leadership is the main mechanic of the game. And leadership doesn't stop at just resource management, it's so much more. Leadership as a mechanic means making decisions, understanding NPCs and how they tick, having to take all the responsibility and feeling the weight of the world on your shoulders while staying focused and keeping your entire crew from falling apart. It is quite a duty to have. Even do I will most likely never experience something similar(hopefully) this game gave me a unique/interesting view of what good leadership is capable of and how rough people and the world can be.

Takeaway two: *Leadership is hard, all of it. Looking out for people requires many different actions of which many are not fun for both you and your people.*

The sheer amount of prototypes that have been created for *The Pale Beyond* is bizarre. But it shows how valuable prototypes are. In your first concept, you can have a game with character movement and later you can just remove everything to really hone into your key experience.

Takeaway three: *Focus on the experience you want to deliver and remove everything that is in the way.*

Speak to people! Speak speak speak. If you want to make your own indie game, you really need to get your name out there. Go to Gamescon, E3 and whatnot. Talking to people from the industry at these events allows for extremely valuable and somewhat free/cheap feedback on your game. Let them play whatever you have, show your art, introduce the story etc.

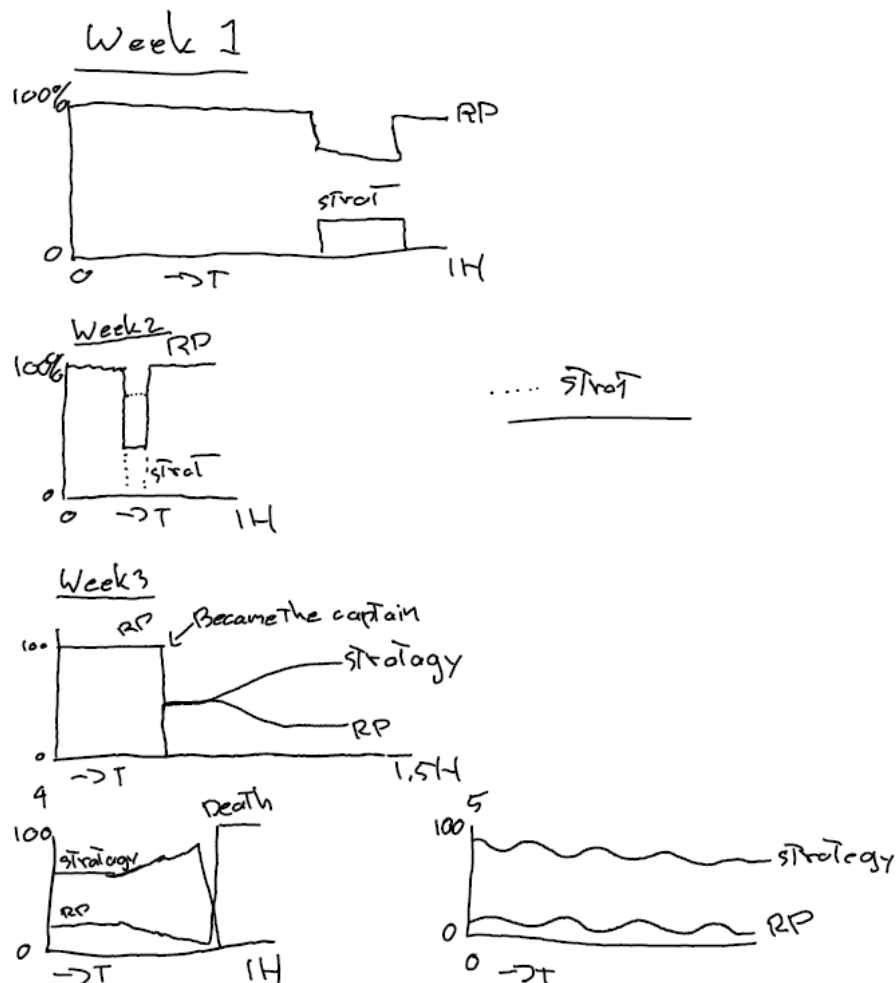
Takeaway four: *Your game requires a lot of blank feedback to flourish. Best gained while socializing.*

## 23rd entry 18th of June

### Theoretical Approach

Something I never talked about is how during the first 5 play sessions I took note of the genre I felt like I was playing. I did this in the form of a 2D graph with on the x-axis time and on the y-axis the percentage of which genres I was playing. It was an interesting way of exploring which genre this game had because I didn't look at the genre of *The Pale Beyond* before playing these sessions. I never thought of this game as a simulation game, an adventure game, a survival game or something else. I only thought of it as a roleplaying game and a strategy game. I don't think I will be doing something like this again (at least not on a large scale), as it is very inaccurate and the current "active" genre can change from moment to moment. The concept that came out of this however is interesting. Genres don't always happen at the same time. Some need to take a step back to give room for other genres to flourish.

Below you can see the graph drawn after the first couple of play sessions. They are very inaccurate, but they give an idea of what I felt the game was like.



## **24th entry 20th of June**

### Cultural exploration

While searching for what to write about in this entry, which I couldn't think of at all I was watching this video of the developers playing the game and I heard this little chime sound(Bellular Studios, 2023 2:05). And I instantly went into deep focus, felt like something important happened, goose bump started to show up and my body just reacted to that little chime. This is affect in all its glory showing through sound design. It's funny how something so little can change our behaviour and experience. It reminds me of my cats at home, who come running from miles away when we ring the food bell(Just a little hotel reception bell). This shows us that anything can be affected by anything however little it is and that the small things can be consequences of very big things. This entire game is riddled with very affective moments, and the game itself affected my way of looking at non-high-intensity games. I tried not to talk about affect in this paper as that is something for a different course, but I fully avoided music in that course, so as I was stuck on what to write about I'm just doing it.

## **25th entry 25th of June**

Something different

Dear diary, I have learned a lot while writing in you and as my last entry, I would like to talk about what I learned while writing this diary.

The main thing I will take away from this is that genre and games as an extension of that are a very unknown field that is in ever-lasting flux. The players of games will use genres in their own way to define games and we the game designers/critics/academics will use them for our own purpose to create games so that we can classify what the game is about. Hopefully, we will also continue to critique genres, as that is the only way to learn more about them. Hopefully, no one will make an infinitely long list of what all genres are about, as when they wrote the first sentence some genre somewhere already changed their meaning.

It is interesting how much you can learn in one semester and it's very curious to reread my own text and see how much I, my opinions, my knowledge, etc. have changed over the last couple of months. Reading my first diary entry is almost like reading someone else's text.

This course started with an assignment trying to answer "What is genre?". After exploring the field of genre studies, I think genre is best classified by what Berlant said.

"Genre's provide an affective expectation off the experience of watching something unfold"  
(Berlant 2011, 6)

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