

The Pale Beyond

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Selected Topics in Game Studies: Affect and Interpersonal Relationships

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Game introduction

The Pale Beyond is a game made by *Bellular Studios* released in 2023. The game is a story-driven survival game with crew management mechanics. The player plays as Robin Shaw the first mate on a ship which is aiming to retrieve a missing research ship that went to the pale beyond(The Antarctic). Along the way, the player becomes the captain and gains full control of the expedition which encounters many life-threatening situations.

The game has some overarching mechanics. The crew, which needs to be managed, keeping them happy and alive. There are 5 types of crew members. Sailors, the grunts who can't do anything special as all crew is capable of doing a sailor's job. Scouts can be sent out to scout the area. Engineers who can keep the warmth of the camp going and scientists who can do numerous different science activities. All these characters are minor characters in the game(Despain 2009, 23). The important ones are the specialists (the major character). These characters all have their own special role in the game and have a loyalty mechanic attached to them. More on that under Mechanics of Identity.

In addition to the crew, the player also has resources to manage. There are 3 resources, Food, warmth and decorum. The role of these resources is as follows. Food is food and is required to keep the crew from starving to death. Warmth which keeps the crew from freezing to death comes in the form of things that can burn, which can also be food. Decorum is the resource that quantifies the general mood within the crew. If the decorum reaches 0 the crew rip itself apart and the player loses. Decorum is gained in various ways. The player also has the crew and dogs which could, mechanically, be seen as resources.

Ludonarrative Resonance

Every game mechanic in *The Pale Beyond* impacts the narrative. All narrative choices have mechanical consequences. This fact creates something called *ludonarrative resonance*(Watssman 2012, n.p.). When mechanics and narrative are always impacting each other. This is one of the major reasons why *The Pale Beyond* is a great game. As the game keeps the player immersed in the same way across the game. There are no mechanical moments that take the player's mind off the narrative or vice versa, it is always both at the same time. The mechanics of *The Pale Beyond* are not very exciting, which is a

benefit for the Ludonarrative resonance. As the player is not inclined to quickly go through the narrative bits to get to the “fun” stuff.

Affect of Identity

The player plays Robin Shaw. A character of which only three aspects are known. Where were you born, what is your previous work experience and the name Robin Shaw. The first two the player can choose at the start of the game. There is no art, gender, voice, or anything else known about the player character. However, during the game, the player interacts with the NPCs who ask questions. The player can then respond to these questions in different ways creating the backstory of Robin Shaw when needed. This also alters the future interactions with the NPCs, albeit minimally. This system creates a very unique kind of experience for the player as they can create their own identity of who Robin Shaw is. Are they an iron-fisted leader? A kind and delicate captain or something else? That’s all up to the player to imagine and portray in the game.

This type of player character is known as a shell avatar(Schallegger 2016, 45). Which is a great avatar type to form an affective bond with. As the player can fully immerse themselves into the character and fully identify with Robin Shaw. The player is not just playing Robin Shaw they can portray themselves as Robin Shaw. The player can also portray any other character onto Robin Shaw if they wish to.

Death

Death in narrative games is something strange (Death here means a loss condition where the player has to go back to a previous save, most of the time because the player avatar died and death in the normal sense). Should there be death in narrative games? The goal of such a game is to tell a story, not to test the player’s skills. NPC death is something else, as that could be part of the story. There are two sides to this. If the game takes place in a dangerous place(the pale beyond for example) death is an ever-looming presence. Increasing the immersion and the interpersonal relationships you have with your character and the NPCs as they could end at any point. However, if this death ends with a “You lose” screen followed by you having to go back to an old save the emersion of the game breaks. Save systems are in most games not part of the narrative structure. This is however a very affective moment to lose your avatar and the NPCs because death can have a strong impact on the player, affecting them forever.

The Save System

The saving system in *The Pale Beyond* takes an interesting approach to saving. The game is cut up in weeks and at the end of each week, the game saves itself. Creating a save node on a node line. If the

player wants to go back to a node all nodes that later moments in the game will be deleted. This system makes it so that everything you do has a certain amount of permanency to it. The player can't just reload the game after making a mistake. This creates an affective relationship to the game as your choices in the game are lasting. It also diverts players from wanting to go back to previous weeks as you will have to redo entire weeks of content, this can be quite the drag as the player has to go through a lot of dialogue again. However, if the player does go back the affective bloomspace of the game changes (Gregg 2010, 9). As you can now interact with the game from a different angle, make different choices on your way to the point where you died. Creating new affective moments. These moments, however, are different now than if you would have taken the now-chosen path the first time before you died. There is no raw experience when it comes to affect after all (Masumi 2011, 207).

Mechanics of Identity

One of the major mechanics in *The Pale Beyond* is the loyalty system. A measure which determines the loyalty of the major character towards the player. The player can interact with this via NPCs interactions. Depending on how you handle them they will become more or less loyal to you. However, this isn't as simple as being a kind person. Or as to shower them with gifts (however that is sometimes part of it). The player needs to understand each NPC and interact with all of them differently. Some require love and affection, while others require an iron fist or something in between. It requires quite a lot of tact to fully figure out how each major character ticks but it's a great moment when you do. However, in *The Pale Beyond* it is not required to have everyone's or anyone's loyalty to you to finish the game. The player can still finish the game without any of the crew liking them. Adding an extra layer of player/character identity.

Cruel Optimism

The Pale Beyond and its story is one big cruel and optimistic adventure. But does that also entail that cruel optimism plays a role here (Berlant 2011)? The crew is in a truly life-and-death situation and many truly cruel things happen. But in between these cruel moments, we have impasses, where the crew doesn't know what to do except for trying to stay alive. The crew lives in temporary housing, having to move to a new location every couple weeks, to avoid the ice melting away under their feet. And this lasts for a long period of time. The ordinary life of the crew has become survival and they find themselves developing skills to survive their newly found lives. With the hopes of a better future away from the ice. This is a genre of crisis and I would say is riddled with cruel optimism.

If we look at *The Pale Beyond* from a larger scope, from the viewpoint of the whole story as one impasse we also find cruel optimism. The reason for going out into the pale beyond is riddled with

optimistic/capitalistic reasoning as the benefactor of the expedition is in search of a research ship with very valuable knowledge. I like to think of *The Pale Beyond* as an impasse of impasses.

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