

Game Narrative Review

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Month/Year you submitted this review: November/2023

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Game Title: Umurangi Generation

Platform: PC, Nintendo Switch, Xbox One

Genre: first-person photography

Release Date: May 19, 2020 (PC)

Developer: Origame Digital

Publisher: Origame Digital

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Naphtali Faulkner

Clarification note: At times this submission uses Aotearoa, the native Māori term for New Zealand.

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*Dedicated to the Umurangi Generation
The last generation who has to watch the world die.*

Overview

Umurangi Generation (Umurangi: Māori for “red sky”) is a game about the end of the world. The player is a courier on the Tauranga Express, a package delivery service that operates in the Tauranga region. As they traverse through locations ranging from neon-lit city rooftop hangouts to darkened nighttime battlefields, they witness the bones of a New Zealand ravaged by invasion.

Under UN occupation and beset by alien invaders resembling giant bluebottle jellyfish, to say that life in Aotearoa sucks would be an understatement. Left with a puppet prime minister (the previous one was removed by the UN for “getting in the way”) and under martial law, the dominant feelings in this pseudo-cyberpunk version of Aotearoa are those of anger and despair. Living in - and under - what remains of the city of Tauranga (and presumably other New Zealand cities), as mechas resembling those in classic Japanese mecha animes such as *Neon Genesis Evangelion* do battle with their kaijus, the populace is forced to reckon with the end of days.

*IF YOU TRY TO KILL THE EARTH
DON'T BE SURPRISED WHEN IT DEFENDS ITSELF*

The kaijus are not invading for no reason - in fact, given the framing as an allegory for climate change, it is likely that the kaiju invasion is similarly man-made. Inspired by the Australian bushfires of 2019 and 2020, the narrative is inspired by the failure of the neoliberal system to address the crises it causes. The politics of the game are unambiguous. An existential threat to the future of humanity, while those with the power to do anything about it are at best uninterested in solving the problem, or at worst are actively leveraging it to consolidate power and wealth - it is difficult to read this as anything other than a metaphor for climate change.

The cyberpunk/mecha-inspired setting might be deceptive - *Umurangi Generation* is not a story of mechas and kaijus. It is a game about climate change, neoliberalism, and crises. It is a sarcastic, passionate, bitter game.

It is a story that wears its rage on its sleeve.

Characters

The UN - The force occupying New Zealand, the United Nations has done so ostensibly in the name of defending against the alien threat. Spearheaded by the United States and the UK, the measures they have taken during the occupation are repressive and draconian - freedom of

movement is abolished, armed soldiers patrol the streets, and resistance to the occupation is put down in violent fashion. The effectiveness of their defence is also questionable - newspapers scattered across some levels are headlined with the UN's failure to defend the island of Papamoa, and the morale of their troops is low, as even they are questioning the purpose of their occupation.

In the DLC *Umurangi Generation Macro*, set two weeks before the events of the base game, a secret area reveals that the UN is experimenting on the very things it is supposed to be fighting - in a hidden laboratory a mech lies under construction, a fusion of the robotic sentinels already fielded by the UN and the bluebottle jellyfish kaijus they battle.

Maxine Dixon - A Māori mech pilot from the now underground walled city of Kati Kati, she is dead by the time of the narrative, having been killed defending her hometown from a kaiju. Despite the prevailing anti-UN sentiment in New Zealand, Maxine is memorialised as a hero and a victim by Kati Kati; several memorials - notably, none of which are official, taking the form of graffiti and adhoc candle vigils - are scattered throughout the Kati Kati level. *Umurangi Generation Macro* reveals that she was romantically involved with a fellow mech pilot, who can be found distraught in their barracks - a UN official is chastising her for being distraught at Maxine's death. Maxine's death, and the various responses to it, reveal the callousness of the UN towards even its own people - and that even those within its systems can be victims of it.

The 1% - The human antagonists - probably the real antagonists - of the narrative, they hold the power to confront the conflict, and yet do nothing as they are insulated from its consequences. The Prime Minister, for example, is not even in Aotearoa at the time of the game. Mirroring Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison's vacation to Hawaii during the Australian bushfires, he is on holiday in Rarotonga. The player witnesses this avoidance first-hand in the first level of *Macro*; during an emergency lockdown of Tauranga's underground city, wealthy people in suits party ignorant and uncaring to the danger on the surface. Meanwhile, those unable to gain entry to the club - including all of the player's friends - are left outside. It is implied that the wealthy may yet go a step further in shielding themselves from the consequences - advertisements reveal the existence of an off-world colony mission, so that once the Earth is rendered uninhabitable, those with the means can escape and start a new life.

Your friends - There is little biographical information about the player's friends save their names - Micah, Atarau, Kete, and the penguin Pengi - though even this information is not given in the game itself, but rather in the Steam Points Shop. Accompanying the player in every level, save for the final one, they can be directed by the player into a number of preset poses - save for one level where they are too busy assisting UN troops during a kaiju attack. These poses change depending on the situation they are in - in the first level, the poses they can take are relaxed and comfortable, while in the penultimate level their poses range from resigned to anxious.

You - The player is an unnamed Māori courier. Like their friends, no biographical information is given - and unlike your friends, your character is not even given a name. Politically active, before the events of the base game the player character protests the UN occupation of Aotearoa in the final level of the DLC *Umurangi Generation Macro*. The player does not really have any impact on the story - in fact, nothing in the world reacts to them. NPCs do not acknowledge the player, save for their friends when the player poses them, and each level contains nothing to interact with. The only way in which the player can interact with the world is through their camera - and even then, it is not an interaction with the world, but a recording of it. In this way, the game reflects the player as a representation of the game's eponymous Umurangi Generation - lacking the institutional power to affect any change, the player can do nothing at the end of the world except witness it.

Breakdown

Synopsis/Structure:

Umurangi Generation is split into 9 levels, with 4 additional levels added by the *Macro* DLC. Each level corresponds to a different stage in the player's route, as they complete deliveries across Tauranga and the end of the world unfolds.

The first few levels in the game are deceptively peaceful - though on further inspection, sinister details can be observed scattered throughout. The first level, a brightly graffitied rooftop hangout offers a perfect view of the 'protective blockades' the UN has set up around Tauranga. Jets fly overhead, and the ocean is shaded an unnatural red. As the player travels through a military outpost at Otumoetai, the Walled City of Kati Kati, and the Strand, the player witnesses and photographs the consequences of an alien invasion and the subsequent occupation of Aotearoa. Scattered throughout the levels are hints as to what is going on - graffiti at the military outpost reveal the demoralisation and ineffectiveness of the troops defending Aotearoa; memorials in Kati Kati are dedicated to Maxine, a local-turned-mech-pilot who was killed in action defending her hometown; newspaper headlines on the Strand allude to an absent puppet prime minister and a disastrous battle to save the island of Papamoa.

However, it is not until the fifth level, *Contact*, that the player directly witnesses the invasion, as they return to the Otumoetai military outpost to find it under attack from a giant bluebottle kaiju. The tone of the game takes a considerably darker turn from then on. The following level depicts an evacuation by train, as the player can see the half-submerged structures of the old Tauranga surface - with body bags in the back of the train as evidence of the human casualties of the battle. The subway stop the player character passes through is crowded with refugees lining up to receive supplies distributed by UN troops.

In the penultimate level, the player returns to where it all began - the bright graffitied rooftop. However, the invasion has reached a boiling point - out on the water, 3 mechs do battle

with a kaiju unlike any seen before, under a dark, blood red sky. The final level shows the aftermath of that battle, Tauranga left as nothing but ruins.

Narrative Delivery

Nowhere in the game is the narrative explicitly spelled out - there are no cutscenes, no text screens detailing the story, no dialogue with NPCs. *Umurangi Generation* relies almost exclusively on environmental storytelling, supplemented with small amounts of text, largely in the form of graffitied messages and newspaper headlines. Each level is packed with small details that, despite typically not giving any concrete narrative information, contribute to the player's understanding of the world via connotation. Through these details, the player gets a sense of how the world and its people feel - their thoughts regarding their UN occupiers, their sense of morale, how they've been coping with the end of the world.

Of course, what text the player does get is important to constructing a context for the connotations - a story cannot consist of feeling alone. The general outline - the alien invasion of Aotearoa, the UN occupation in response, and the battles lost by the UN in its defence - is given to the player via the scraps of text found typically in newspaper headlines and graffitied walls. But that is all that is given - an outline. Everything else is left to be inferred and discovered by the player and their camera; the extent of the UN's occupation of Aotearoa; the different effects the invasion has had on the world; the ways people confront the end of days.

It's just weather
It's just earthquakes
It's just kaiju
It's just the end of the world

Themes

Informed by the bushfires that devastated the Australian outback between 2019 and 2020 - and the way the government did (and didn't) react to them, *Umurangi Generation* criticises how the system under the neoliberal status quo acts in crisis. References and parallels to our own world are clear and present in the world of *Umurangi Generation*; from deadbeat prime ministers during times of crisis, to the partisan denial of existential threats, to proposals for off-planet escapes from inevitable catastrophe. The story itself parallels how the neoliberal status quo in the real world has addressed the issue of climate change - with chronic underreaction to the existential threat at hand, and incredible overreaction against those dissatisfied with how the system has addressed the issue. Displayed throughout the game, this theme is demonstrated most obviously in the final level of *Umurangi Generation Macro* - in a devastating display of overkill - or perhaps an intentionally intimidating show of force - an enormous mech meant for battling kaijus is used to quash demonstrators protesting the UN occupation.

I DON'T NEED PERMISSION TO NOT DIE

The helplessness and disenfranchisement of the lower classes is a prevailing theme throughout the game, as graffiti details the anger citizens have towards the increasingly authoritarian restrictions placed upon them. Oppressed by the authorities and demonised by the media, there seems to be very little anybody can do to change things. The final level of *Umurangi Generation Macro* has the player and their friends joining the demonstration against UN occupation - but the protest is doomed from the beginning. By the events of the base game, the only people with the power to change anything are well off-screen.

Gameplay/Narrative Interaction

The game manages to capture the helplessness of disempowered groups in part due to the lack of narrative agency given to the player. The player character is unimportant in the grand scheme of things - lacking any institutional power to affect change, there is no way for someone of the player character's station to actually do anything to change the story's outcome. This is reflected in the gameplay, in which the player is actually unable to interact with *anything* except for their friends. All they can do is take photos - creating a sense that the player is not actually an actor in the world, but a spectator. The world is uncaring and unresponsive to anything the player does - with one exception. During the final level of *Umurangi Generation Macro*, armed police break up the protest, resulting in a police officer clobbering the player character over the head. Thus, the gameplay reflects the player character's place in the world's narrative - ignored by the system until they are too annoying to ignore, at which point they are repressed and ignored once more.

Another gameplay element that feeds into the narrative is the penalty for photographing the bluebottle jellyfish scattered throughout the level. These bluebottle jellyfish bear striking resemblances to the kaijus that attack the outpost - and though there are no explicit narrative links given between the jellyfish and the kaijus (in fact, there is no explanation for what the jellyfish are doing there in the first place either), the penalty is a reflection of how attempts to bring attention to problems are regarded - deflected, ignored, and penalised for daring to interfere with the illusion that things are under control.

Strongest Element

In most games, relying so heavily on environmental storytelling is a risk, as game designers are usually unable to guarantee that players will actually see the story during the course of their gameplay, instead of skipping over it. The player, if they want to experience the entire story, often has to take the initiative to explore every nook and cranny of every level

themselves - if they lack that instinct, they might breeze through the game without ever discovering certain elements. However, through the photo-taking mechanic and the strategic selection and placement of photo objectives, exploring every nook and cranny *becomes* the gameplay experience; not only must the player find the objectives they need to photograph, but they also must find a way to frame their shots in such a way as to successfully complete their objective. By requiring the player to explore each level in detail and to carefully consider each photograph, the player is forced to slow down and take in the visual information offered in the level. Thus, the gameplay is designed in such a way that it becomes practically impossible to progress without becoming intimately familiar with each location and the stories embedded within them.

Unsuccessful Element

Umurangi Generation does step on its own toes to some extent - it contradicts its strongest narrative element by adding a timer to each level in its normal mode. In order to unlock certain camera tools, the player must not only complete the objectives required to advance the level within this 10 minute timeframe, but they must also complete additional objectives. With the timer already incentivising the player to skim through the level's objectives as quickly as possible, as opposed to carefully taking in each detail, one particular additional objective is particularly egregious in how it incentivises the player to play the game.

This objective is a collectible search in the form of film canisters. Small and awkward to find, these canisters draw the player's attention away from the big picture (if you will excuse the pun) - unlike the other objectives which require the player to carefully understand each level's details, the film canisters do not even require the player to take a picture. Searching for them is a matter of simple pattern recognition - and so, the objective incentivises the player to ignore the rest of the level in favour of myopically hunting for tiny, uniform collectibles. These canisters are really small, and *really* annoying to find. Furthermore, they snatch the player's attention away from the big picture (if you'll excuse the pun). Through the photo objectives the player is incentivised to examine the level - but with the film canister objective, the player is not incentivised to look *at* the level - they are looking *for* the canisters.

The search for the canisters goes against what makes the gameplay so compelling. Instead of analysing the world in detail, the player is incentivised to myopically search for small collectibles. This creates a conflict between the player taking time to explore and analyse the world, and completing every objective in time.

This is not as big of a deal as it might sound - other than missing the reward, there are no penalties for taking too much time to complete the level, and the reward is given later on anyway. However, it is still an instance where the more game-like elements of the game conflict with its ability to convey the narrative through its environment.

Highlight

The highlight of the game is easily the final level. Unlike the other levels, the player does not immediately have their camera out, and unlike the other levels, there is not much exploration to be done. The lifeless arm of a mech behind the player is about the only notable thing in the player's starting area. The path is totally linear, leading through a small lake and over the crest of a hill, to reveal the final landscape of the game: the ruins of Tauranga, half-submerged in the sea.

Ghosts of extinct animals - made out of stars - face the water, disappearing into thin air. Watching over the scene are a pair of humans, dressed in traditional Māori kākahu (cloak). The man holds a taiaha, a Māori spear, upright, as if standing guard over the animals. They are supposed to be the kaitiaki¹ of these animals, but they are coloured and textured in a similarly ghostly fashion. They cannot protect these animals - they share the same fate.

Ahead, the kaiju facing off against the mechs in the previous level perches on a pillar in the sea in front.

Approaching this scene, the player finally gets their camera out. There are no photo objectives anymore - the player can take a photo of anything - the ghosts of the animals, the ghosts of the kaitiaki, the ruins of the world.

But the most natural inclination is to take a photo of the perched kaiju. It is the only photo the player takes during this level, and it accompanies the credits as the game ends.

Behind it is the backdrop of a blood red sky.



¹ A Māori concept loosely translating to guardianship or stewardship of the natural environment

The image speaks for itself. Imposing and grand, the framing of the kaiju - almost blocking out the moon - carries an intense gravitas that captures the sense of doom that has been the undercurrent of the game's emotions. Unlike every level previously, where the player was free to play around with camera settings, the player isn't able to change their camera mode - stuck using a standard shot, the kaiju dominates any image that could possibly be taken of it.

Even taking a photo of something else carries a strong sense of dread - the level's palette of black and red means that any photo taken is inevitably going to be a dramatic image of red and black. For a game whose narrative revolves around the end of the world - both in the game, and its potential real-life equivalent - this is a fitting and powerful ending.

Critical Reception

Umurangi Generation was favourably received on its release, with critics praising its narrative for its unambiguous messaging, its portrayal of neoliberalism and fascism, and the way its narrative intertwined with its gameplay.

'Umurangi Generation': A photography game that urges you to look closer (Washington Post, Mikhail Klimentov, no score given)

Writing for the Washington Post, Mikhail Klimentov praises *Umurangi Generation* for how the game bridges the gap between gameplay and story through its environment. Klimentov compares it favourably to other games that are more cinematic in their narrative delivery but ultimately only make their gaminess more apparent in doing so, praising the way the game pulls players into the narrative "like a dream". Klimentov also praises *Umurangi Generation* for its lack of fear in assigning a clear narrative villain, comparing *Umurangi Generation*'s scathing indictment of the neoliberal system favourably to games like *The Division 2*'s refusal to assign blame for what shattered its world. In a similar vein, Klimentov appreciates how the game does not just take the aesthetic elements of the cyberpunk genre and actually engages with the genre's historic themes that are criticisms of the inequalities brought about by neoliberalism and authoritarianism.

Umurangi Generation Special Edition review - a uniquely thoughtful game about crisis (Eurogamer, Christian Donlan, no score given)

Christian Donlan's review for Eurogamer calls *Umurangi Generation* "a game with a vital, necessarily angry message from a generation and a group of people that feels unseen and unheard". Like Klimentov, Donlan praises how the game "uses the camera it places in your hands to draw you into a narrative and give you the freedom and the tools to decide what it all means for yourself", describing his experience as he pieced together the story through the

pictures he took of the world. Donlan notes how the game “[channels] stuff that is very real and very topical”, and praises the narrative’s relevancy to the issues of the current day - calling it “timely, but also timeless, like a perfect Polaroid snapshot.”

Umurangi Generation Review - Cyberpunk Snap (Gamespot, Khee Hoon Chan, 9/10)

Khee Hoon Chan of Gamespot, like the previous reviews, notes *Umurangi Generation*’s topical narrative, describing it as “an acute reflection of recent crises”. Similarly to the other reviews, Chan praises the game’s method of environmental narrative delivery, stating that “through this framing that the game’s message is made all the more resounding” by using the photo taking mechanic to “invite [the player] to look beyond the city’s glistening surfaces and delve into the sobering narrative that exists outside”. Like Klimentov, Chan also praises the game’s understanding of cyberpunk as a genre that “traditionally...has reckoned with and challenged the status quo that feeds real-world inequality”.

Lessons

- **In games relying on environmental storytelling, players should be incentivised to explore**

The reason *Umurangi Generation*’s storytelling is so successful is that players are required to explore the level in detail in order to make forward progress. This ensures that players pick up on the environmental storytelling spread throughout the world, giving them fragments of the story that they can then piece together themselves. Without this incentivisation - or even worse, with a mechanical incentivisation *against* exploring - environmental storytelling falls by the wayside, and crucial narrative elements that are shown exclusively through environmental storytelling are missed, creating a disjointed narrative from the perspective of the player.

- **Game narratives do not have to be overly detailed to be compelling or effective**

Umurangi Generation does not offer much in the way of specific details. Dates are omitted, crucial events and statistics are glossed over, and even the reasons why events have played out as they have are not elaborated on. The player is given the skeleton of the story, and enough details to keep the narrative from becoming generic - and the rest is for the player to imagine. Despite, or perhaps because of this, the narrative manages to retain its emotional impact for reasons that will be elaborated on in the following lesson.

- **Players should be trusted to connect the dots** (or: show, don’t tell)

While the narrative of *Umurangi Generation* is not particularly detailed, the levels in the game are - and each detail contributes to the narrative in a less explicit - but no less important - way. *Umurangi Generation* relies heavily on connotation to convey certain details and emotions about the narrative. There are no direct specifications as to which freedoms the UN curtails in its occupation - but based off the “protective barriers”, the increasing militarisation of spaces, and the population’s general animosity towards the occupation, it can reasonably be inferred that the UN is probably curtailing many of them; it is not explicitly stated that the people of Tauranga have begun to fall into a despairing, escapist mindset, but the NPCs slumped over in alleys wearing virtual reality headsets are probably a sign; there is no signpost saying “the invasion and occupation have impacted different socioeconomic classes disproportionately”, but rich business people partying in a nightclub under an emergency lockdown while those without the means to do so are left to endure the sounds of violence *might* be a clue. If the players were not trusted to make these basic inferences, and instead the game explicitly stated these details, much of the narrative impact would be lost - after all, it is one thing to read about something, and it is another thing altogether to see it with one’s own eyes.

- **Be brave**

Umurangi Generation was praised for being unafraid to have a clear, unambiguous message in its narrative. When a game tiptoes around the issues that envelop their world for fear of upsetting certain sections of their player base, it lacks the narrative bite that a clear, unambiguous message holds - example being *The Division 2*, as mentioned in the review before. *Umurangi Generation*, on the other hand, firmly criticises the real-world system that it perceives as being responsible for the issues that come to a head in its narrative. *Umurangi Generation* might upset players of certain political persuasions due to this choice - but this also results in a far more potent narrative.

Summation

Umurangi Generation is somewhat unique in that the narrative of the game is told exclusively environmentally. This carries certain challenges, such as the challenge of ensuring that information is not glossed over, and the restriction on the amount of narrative detail that can be conveyed. However, through clever gameplay design, *Umurangi Generation* overcomes this to create a narrative that, though lacking in finer detail, manages to deliver a compelling, emotionally charged story, and is made even better for it. Arming the player with a camera and tasking them with documenting the world, *Umurangi Generation* is not a game that features excessive exposition or an overly complex story. It is a game that unambiguously means what it says, without coming off as preachy or trite. It is a game that has no aspirations of being

compared to the more established artforms of cinema and literature - and in dropping these pretences, *Umurangi Generation* shows just how much of an artform games can be.

Citations

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