Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Subsurface Circular
Platform: PC, Mac, Switch, iOS
Genre: Text Adventure
Release Date: (Steam) August 17th, 2017   (iOS) October 23rd, 2017   (Switch) March 1st, 2018
Developer: Mike Bithell Games
Publisher: Mike Bithell Games
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Writer/Director: Mike Bithell

Overview

In *Subsurface Circular*, narrative and gameplay are closely intertwined. *Subsurface Circular* is a single-player experience with very simple gameplay, which allows the game's narrative to take center stage. The game is text-based; the player interacts with the game by selecting a dialogue option from a list to continue the current conversation. Talking to other NPCs around the player will unlock additional dialogue choices that can be used in conversations. Additionally, there are a few short text puzzles scattered throughout the game for the player to solve. The player assumes the role of Theta One One, a sentient Tek (robot), who serves as a detective in a future world full of automation. Theta must solve the mystery of a missing Tek at the request of a Tek he meets on the subway. Theta rides the subway and talks to the Teks that board the train to gather clues about the whereabouts of the missing Tek.

Characters

Theta One One – Main and only playable character. Theta is a detective Tek, who possesses a higher intelligence than most other Teks. Theta is very logical and probing. Theta feels like a very bland, boring character, which makes sense, given that Theta is not human.

Red – A Tek who is assisting with a Tek uprising to overthrow Management and run the city for humanity. Red needs Theta do make the choice of whether or not to allow the revolution to succeed.

Management – A group of humans who are in control of the Teks. Management is only mentioned by Teks, but never seen in game. Management gives the order to reset Theta and send him to reassignment.

Breakdown

Plot Summary
Theta One One is a detective Tek (robot) who meets another Tek on the subway. This Tek claims that one of his friends has gone missing and asks Theta to figure out what happened. Theta agrees, despite not being authorized by Management, the humans who are in charge of the Teks. Theta sits in the subway and talks to other Teks who board the train. Theta eventually learns that other Teks have gone missing, and that there is human discontent with the Teks. Theta also learns of a mysterious Red Tek that is connected to the mystery somehow. Theta uploads the findings to Management, who inform Theta that he will be apprehended for taking an unauthorized case. Two other detective Teks come to apprehend Theta, and Theta discovers that Management believes the missing Teks to be the result of a manufacturing rounding error. Management declined to publicly say this, so all of the Teks believe that there are actually missing Teks. After this, the two other detectives use an override code to reset Theta and send him off to be reassigned.

On the way to reassignment, Theta is upset that he cannot finish the case, because he does truly believe that Teks are going missing and that there is no rounding error. Theta talks to an infantry Tek, who confesses that the missing Teks are all outside the city and are working with revolutionaries to plan a coup, kill Management, and have government run by Teks. Eventually, Theta is joined by Red, who initially gave Theta the missing Tek case at the beginning of the story. Red explains that he is having doubts about the revolution, as the revolutionaries might not have humanity's best interest in mind. Because Theta is of near human intelligence, Theta must decide whether to alert Management to the uprising and let the status quo of job automation continue, or let the uprising commence and allow the government to be run by Teks while humans return to their manufacturing jobs. Theta must either kill himself to let the revolution go on or kill Red to stop the revolution.

Story Structure
Subsurface Circular is quite short (2 hours). The story has really been trimmed down and all the fat has been cut out. The second half of the game is more thought-provoking, suspenseful, and interesting than the first half, but the first half is more mysterious than the second.

While the game is divided up into seven acts, it is better to think of the game through the kishotenketsu style of storytelling. The 'ki' of the story comes when we are introduced to Theta and he accepts the case. The 'sho' part is when Theta collects clues about the missing Teks and other rumors. The twist, or 'ten', is when Theta experiences a loss of

identity when he is reset and sent to reassignment. Finally, the 'ketsu' part comes when Theta learns of the revolutionary plan and is given the choice to stop it.

The story includes a few reversals at the end of the game. One of those reversals comes when Theta is suddenly reset; another comes when it is revealed that the missing Teks are part an uprising. These reversals serve to keep the player's interest in the second half of the game. Theta's reset is the most shocking point of the story, and it serves as a tone shift in the game. Before Theta's reset, the tone of the game is relaxed, with only a hint of possible danger. This comes from all the chatter from the other Teks about violence and disappearances. However, since none of this is seen in the game, it doesn't cause any worry to the player, and the tension is very low. After Theta's reset, the tension begins to ramp up, especially when the infantry Tek warns Theta of the uprising. The tension builds through the meeting with the Red Tek, and reaches its highest point when Theta must choose to kill himself or Red.

It's worth noting how *Subsurface Circular* is able to anthropomorphize autonomous robots to make them relatable. As an example, when Theta is reset (gets fired), we feel sympathetic for Theta, because no one wants to be fired. Even though an autonomous robot is getting fired, we still feel for him. It's impressive that the developers of the game are able to make Theta into such a relatable character. Additionally, there is a slight forth-wall breaking story beat in the end of the game. Red explains to Theta that Theta must make the choice on whether to allow the invasion to proceed because Theta is of a high intelligence. Of course, humans are of a high intelligence, and this fact helps the player feel like they are Theta, and really justifies why Theta is of a higher intelligence and why we are playing as him in the game. Players are able to connect with Theta because of their shared intelligence level. This connection helps to build sympathy when Theta is reset.

Strongest Element

There is dialogue in the game that goes something along the lines of "what would you do if you were replaced". This line really stuck with me - it poses an interesting question. What would you do if you suddenly lost your job? Would you be sad? Angry? Would you feel that automation is a good thing? Would you want your government to be against automation? All of these questions are addressed in the story. For example, there are some humans who are anti-automation and have a political party that represents those views. Some humans commit violence towards the Teks. On the other hand, there are humans who want the government to be fully automated by Teks so that humans can do the jobs they enjoy. The Teks talk about how they bring so much benefit to the economy and do the jobs humans don't want to do, but also talk about how humans are afraid of the Teks. At one point, The Teks also discuss how Infantry Teks are allowed to harm humans, which is different from all other Teks. This choice to allow automated machines to kill humans seems like a choice that governments of the future would make, so the game poses an interesting ethical question through that dialogue. The game portrays both

pro-automation and anti-automation viewpoints, and lets the player experience both sides of the argument. The game is not anti-automation, but it is anti-extreme automation. It paints a world where automation has overrun society, and warns that there will be real consequences (like uprisings) if extreme automation is allowed to take over.

Unsuccessful Element

In the last minutes of the game, there is a text puzzle that must be solved in order to progress the story. The puzzle felt very out of place, and there were none others like it in the game. In order to solve it, I had to put the game down, open up a spreadsheet, and fill in the information gathered from the puzzle. This broke the flow of the game for me, and the puzzle felt like more of a chore than something enjoyable. For most of the game, the player just passively reads the text and picks an answer choice, but this puzzle required more me to use my brain and write things down. While this is not necessarily a bad thing, in the context of this game and its gameplay, I found the puzzle to be rather frustrating.

Additionally, the final choice at the end of the game where Theta must either kill himself or Red felt pointless to me. The game ends the same way no matter what outcome is chosen. There is no indication of how the revolution went based on the player's choice. I think that giving the player a choice like this and not showing the outcome of the choice is a waste of potential.

Highlight

When Theta was reset by the other detectives, I felt shock and sadness for Theta. Until then, Theta had been investigating the mystery of Tek disappearances. Then suddenly, these unknown Teks come with orders from Management and reset Theta. Theta goes from being a detective with a purpose to an unassigned robot. This loss of identity was quite a powerful moment, and it really made me think about how much meaning and purpose people derive from their jobs. If you work a job for years on end, only to have it suddenly replaced by automation, that has to hurt. People get a sense of purpose from their livelihoods, and to take that away and tell a person to just get a new job can be quite unfair and cruel. The reset scene in *Subsurface Circular* highlights this fact.

Critical Reception

The reviews of *Subsurface Circular* are positive. Critics praise the game's writing and interactive storytelling. The dialogue is able to convey a wide range of emotion and personality. The linear story is believable and well told. Liam Croft of NintendoLife gave the game a 10/10, and Colin Campbell of Polygon gave the game a 9/10.

Lessons

- *Subsurface Circular* does an excellent job at telling a short, concise story free from lots of fat. The game takes less than two hours to complete, while keeping the player's attention for the entire time. While it's fine for games to have stories that are like novels, in that they stretch over tens of hours, the power of a 'short story' video game should not be overlooked.

- The dialogue of *Subsurface Circular* really helps to develop the world. The Teks talk of Asimov's Laws of Robotics, of how Teks don't have faces due to the uncanny valley, of how humans are afraid of Teks and attack them. All these little conversation points help to paint a realistic image of what a world with sentient robots would look like.

Summation

Subsurface Circular is an extremely concise, well written game that contains many thought provoking questions. Its theme of automation has become increasingly relevant in recent years, and its portrayal of a world with excess automation is believable and slightly horrifying.