

Blackbar: A Review

BLACKBAR is a puzzle game in the form of a mobile app. When it opens, the user isn't given any instruction, just presented with a few paragraphs of text that have been partially blacked out. The user figures out that they are able to type in the black blanks, and they proceed to guess what words or fragments were blacked out in each spot based on the surrounding context. The game follows the story of a woman, Kenty, who has accepted a new job and as a result, her mail is being censored. She sends messages to another woman, Vi, who is implied to be her partner. This story seems to be set in a dystopian future society where a mysterious Department keeps everything running by making sure that no one acts out. They go about doing this by spying on citizens and censoring anything they view as "unacceptable" out of communications. Most of the words that are censored in the messages are remotely un-complementary about Kenty's employment with the Department or related to emotions like love, sorrow, or regret. It is interesting that these are the ideas that the Department chooses to stifle: words that could make people feel, along with anything that might paint them in a negative light. They presumably do this to keep their power over people.

However, there is an organization that finds ways around the censorship and works to free people from the hold of the Department. Kenty becomes disillusioned with the organization eventually and turns to this organization to help get her out. She and Vi later work together to sabotage the department, but they are both ultimately captured and killed. Over the course of the story, the person censoring their communication specifically becomes more of a character and less of a faceless censorship robot. They even start to say things to Kenty and Vi alongside censoring their words. Visually, BLACKBAR is almost completely black and white, the story being told by black text on a white screen. When the user guesses a text snippet correctly, the box turns yellow, but that is the only other color. This helps the subject of the game feel more sterile and hostile.

Many of the solutions are obvious, but sometimes the user needs to spend weeks just to uncover the answer to one section, which can be frustrating when you want to know where the story goes next. This frustration mirrors the feelings that the characters must have when they receive their blacked out communications, only they don't have the benefit of being told when they are right. They have to rely on their own guesswork alone.