

“A Dark Room”

Narrative Deconstruction Expedition

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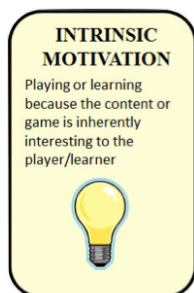
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<https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/a-dark-room/id736683061?mt=8>

“A Dark Room” (hereafter abbreviated as ADR) is a mobile role-playing game created by Amirali Rajan. It was made in collaboration with Michael Townsend, who created the original desktop version of the game.¹ In April 2014 ADR became the #1 paid app on the US iTunes store and lasted on top for over three weeks. In the fall of 2014 Rajan made the app free, which sparked another rise to the top of the charts. This is particularly remarkable as ADR is a text-only game, similar to games from the 1970s such as Zork. There is no audio at all and the only visual elements are the infrequent ASCII text.

As should be plain from the title of this essay, the plot of “A Dark Room” is about to be spoiled. So if upon looking at the iTunes page of the game you think you want to play it for yourself, do so before reading the rest of this essay.

The narrative of the game is unpacked by looking at four distinct theories of learning. First, the developers have relied upon intrinsic motivation to create an intriguing puzzle that hooks the player. Second, the game mechanics are taught to the player through the help of a non-player character called “The Builder”, who, as the mentor character archetype, serves as a Pedagogical Agent inside of the game. Third, as the player advances, the designers use scaffolding and the Zone of Proximal Development to ensure that the challenges gradually escalate but are never impossible. Lastly, the main plot twist of the game carries extra “oomph” because of how the designers utilize Character Attachment Theory and meta-story in order to lead the player down a narrative pathway that proves false.



Rieber sets out “four criteria for an intrinsically motivating game: challenge, curiosity, fantasy and control” (as cited in Breuer and Bente, 2010, p. 13). The curiosity of the player is piqued even before the game has begun, on the App Store page. Serving as the “box cover” for the game, very little background

¹ <http://adarkroom.doublespeakgames.com/>

information is given about the plot; only one screenshot and a cryptic piece of narrative text tell the player about the adventure ahead. (It's since been updated with award information and update details.) This minimal approach to storytelling continues as the game begins with the main character groggily waking up in the eponymous "dark room" as a stranger stumbles in. These elements of the opening hook the player, serving as the curiosity needed for intrinsic motivation.

In addition to curiosity, the opening stages of the game soon provide the player with control over the game environment, another core element of intrinsic motivation. In order to keep the Builder alive, the player must tap the screen to stoke the fire. In order to have enough wood, the player must travel to the forest and cart some back. In this way the player is introduced to one of the core gameplay mechanics of ADR, resource management. From wood the player can create traps and other advanced types of buildings which allow for even more resources to be gathered. Huts can be built and villagers move in. At this point the player can manage the energies of each individual worker, allocating them to produce different types of resources. Eventually the player is in control of a raucous village of up to 80 inhabitants. Similar to Farmville, being in control of such a large village greatly increases intrinsic motivation to play.



It is easy to lose track of time while playing ADR. The designers have done an excellent job creating what Csikszentmihalyi calls "flow", an "optimal learning state...(of immersion)" (as cited in Van Eck, 2007, p. 35). One way that this is accomplished is through the use of a Pedagogical Agent, that is, an Artificial Intelligence in the game that guides and directs the player. ADR does not have a pause button or an in-game encyclopedia to teach the player about the resources they control. Instead, these instructions are delivered along with the narrative through the character of The Builder.

The Builder prompts the player with dialog whenever a new type of building is available. She also explains the purpose of each building, telling the player what can be produced there, and explains what new tools or weapons can be made from new resources. So for example when the player finds furs in the traps, she shares that now you can build a Tannery to create Leather from the furs. Once Leather is in your inventory she tells you that you can make new items (Leather Armor, Water Flask, Bone Spear, Rucksack) in the Workshop. This process repeats upon the discovery of Coal, Iron, and Sulphur. So rather than having to

stop and learn about a new gameplay element, the Builder teaches the player through the game narrative, preserving flow.

On the topic of flow, another design element that has huge aesthetic appeal and keeps the player immersed in the game is the use of the backlight to convey information. Similar to the game “fLOw”,² in which lower levels of the pool are darker, in ADR when the fire dims the screen also dims. This simple mechanism provides plot information to the player, that the fire is low, and prompts them to go back to the main screen of the hut and stoke the fire. This also serves to save the game without ever taking the player to a menu screen and thus out of the flow of the game.

The narrative of ADR is primarily delivered through environmental clues. This was an intentional choice by the designer Michael Townsend, as the original version of the game contained no dialog at all. This narrative, told through the environment, paints a picture of world that surely creates more intrinsic motivation in many players, as it is an element of fantasy. The world the player explores is a post-apocalyptic landscape. Gaunt crazed men rush at the player when you enter abandoned looking houses. Cities are bombed out, schools are dark shells holding scavengers and nightmarish beasts, and forgotten battlefields litter the landscape. The player has to fight through the squadrons of soldiers that provide isolated pockets of order, guarding the coal, iron, and sulphur mines.



As the player explores the wider world, intrinsic motivation and flow are preserved by the designer’s use of gradually increased challenge. Developed by Vygotsky as the “Zone of Proximal Development”, the random enemies encountered close to the village are easier to defeat than those further away. This represents scaffolding, that is, when supports (the easy to defeat enemies) taper off as the player’s character becomes stronger and no longer needs the help (Culatta, 2011). As is typical of most role playing games, the player can collect and/or build more advanced weapons, armor, and items. This allows the player to travel further away from the village and defeat the harder enemies. While defeating enemies does not gain you experience points as in many RPGs, finding new locations unlocks new resources and safehouses that allow even further exploration. Additionally, finding special items unlocks new types of

² <http://www.jenovachen.com/flowinggames/flowing.htm>

adventures: creating the compass unlocks The Dusty Path and eventually guides the player to the Old Starship, which allows travel to Space.

From the first minute of gameplay the player becomes intrinsically motivated, immersed in the flow, and finds appropriate challenges. But the narrative throughout the game is straightforward and linear. The player's character is on a journey to find something, but what is not clear. The Builder aids the character. Thus it seems as if the protagonist is on typical hero's journey from a bad situation (waking up hurt and confused) to a good one (managing a thriving raucous village). But about two-thirds of the way the player realizes that the main character may not have been so good after all. When the village reaches a certain size and the player's exploration of the world has progressed to a certain point the "workers" suddenly turn into "slaves". This is not an active choice made by the player and can be quite surprising. In fact, as Rajan shares on his ADR development blog, some players were so upset that they stopped at this point.



Character Attachment Theory explains why this is such a shocking development. Role-playing games in particular "[encourage the player] to insert themselves into the game environment" (Bowman et al, 2012, p. 170). Players that have been envisioning themselves as "pro-social players" and have been telling themselves a story about how their character is a warrior on a journey for justice have to completely rewrite their understanding of the narrative.

This twist is the first major hint that the main character is not a reliable narrator. As the game is presented with a minimal amount of detail, and with (obviously) no images, the designers are relying on the player to craft their own meta-story about the game. Most players will miss small contradictory details and assume that their character is human. But the fact that the main character is not human, and is in fact an alien from the race that caused the apocalypse, is revealed about two-thirds of the way through the game.

Many clues foretell this twist. For example, the fact that dead wanderers have rifles clasped in "one of their many hands" combined with the fact the main character can use multiple weapons in battle hints that the main character is not human. The shift from "workers" to "slaves" is another telling sign. But the obvious turning point is the text that accompanies the discovery of the abandoned starship: "the familiar curves of a wanderer vessel rise up out of the dust and ash. lucky that the natives can't work the mechanisms." Not only is it clear that the term "wanderer" refers to hostile aliens, it's also clear that the main character is one of these aliens.

As the above plot elements show, meta-story is an integral element of what makes ADR's narrative effective. The design choices made by Rajan and Thompson have a huge impact in bringing this about. So little background or information is given about the plot, from the "box cover" to the sparse environmental clues. Upon reviewing a number of ADR forums and comments, it's clear that not everyone who plays the game has the same view of what actually happens.

One last design element that encourages further play is the secret ending. While the narrative is clearly linear, upon completing the game the player learns that there was a hidden branch in the narrative. After beating the game the text says "The end?", and the player is challenged to start over without using huts (and thus without enslaving humans). So it is now clear to the player that there was a hidden narrative branch at the beginning of the game.

By using intrinsic motivation, a Pedagogical Agent, scaffolding, and utilizing Character Attachment, A Dark Room is a masterpiece of storytelling. One comment that appears often on the iOS App Store is to pay attention to every detail as you play. You can only play A Dark Room for the first time once, so you better enjoy that first time.

Citations

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