Player Agency and the Subjective Playthrough

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<u>Introduction</u>

Video game developers have been trying to craft compelling narratives from the medium's inception. However, until recently, the paradigm has largely been to create stories that are experienced relatively passively by the player—linear narratives told through cutscenes, characterized by a fundamental lack of player agency. This is changing. Technological advances have led to games in which the player is able to take an active, interactive role in shaping stories, either through influence over granular narrative decisions, or by mechanics that allow player expression and creativity. With these games, players are given toolsets that allow them to shape narratives themselves, resulting in playthroughs that are unique to each individual. These individual narratives are often overlooked in games criticism, with critics often focusing merely on a games mechanical aspects, or generic descriptions of playthroughs, with almost no focus on the individual's experience. This essay proposes that examining unique playthroughs provides us with an interesting and rewarding strategy to study games. I will begin with an exploration of the uniqueness of the video game medium, a discussion of why current paradigms for studying games narrative are problematic, and an analysis of a partial playthrough of *Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri* that leads to new insights about the game.

<u>Gaming: A Truly Unique Medium</u>

I would like to begin this essay by spending a fair bit of energy examining why exactly video games are a truly unique art form. This is an idea that is frequently bandied about, but there is less discussion of the subject than seems appropriate—usually the interactivity of games is cited, everyone agrees, and the discussion moves towards whatever the author really wanted to talk about. Of course, there have been efforts to define what exactly makes games so special, but much of these efforts focus primarily on the distinctions between games and literature or movies. Comparatively little effort has been made to situate games in relation to other interactive forms of art, like improvisational storytelling, or a table top roleplaying game session. In analyzing

video games on a spectrum of other art, a startling independence emerges, one that is helpful in framing how we talk about games.

The general aim of this graph is to place various forms of relevant creative work on a spectrum of how much input is required to enjoy each. A brief justification for each entry follows. [1]

Low Input, Well-Defined, Non-Interactive Experiences: Film and Literature

Film requires very little creative input from the viewer. Audio and video fully engage sight and hearing. The viewer will likely be required to fill in gaps in the narrative with inferences,[2] puzzle out symbolism, or make sense of a confusing chain of events. That said, the basic sights and sounds of the story are usually presented fairly unambiguously.

In **literature**, the mind is engaged more, as the reader will be required to interpret words into mental images, decipher literary devices, and generally take a more active role. Such efforts produce more variance in the individual experience (i.e., readers will likely picture characters differently in their heads,) but at a fundamental level, the story is still fairly immutable and constant from reader to reader.

Both literature and film are **well-defined** experiences. A work in either medium is specifically constructed. The book is the collection of words in a specific order, the movie is the

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1   Of course, the edges of these genres are not so clearly defined in the real world, and I have no doubt someone would be able to find a certain book that is more interactive than a certain video game, or a tabletop RPG that is less so. But, I think the statements that follow are generally true.

2   For instance, imagine a sequence in which a character enters a car, and is later shown to be leaving the car in a new location with a soft drink. We "fill in the blanks," as it were, and imagine that they have driven from the first location to the other, perhaps stopping at a convenience store on the way, even though we do not see that onscreen.

sequence of frames on the filmstrip. Change anything, and you have a new work. Thus, we are able to have well-defined "objective" versions of works in these genres.

These mediums are also **non-interactive**. Books or movies have no systems to produce output in response to reader/viewer actions.[3]

Medium Input, Well-Defined, Interactive Experiences: Video Games

In **video games**, audio and visual elements make a return, but the interactive nature of games means that players are constantly asked to provide input that alters these elements. In many games, these actions are not terribly creative (Mario jumping is not a statement), but many games now ask the player to make narrative decisions or provide tools that allow for creative endeavors. In those sorts of games, players are required to take actions that produce different gameplay experiences, greatly increasing the variability of the experience.

Video games are inherently **well-defined**. Video games require computation of some sort, and so can be defined as a specific collection of computer code. No matter how expansive the simulation, the player will always have strict boundaries on what actions the code allows them to take, and those boundaries will be identical for every player.

Video games are also **interactive**; the player has some measure of control over the events that occur onscreen.

High Input, Undefined, Interactive Experiences: Tabletop Gaming and Improvisational Storytelling.

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3   Of course, the reader of a book must interact with it by turning the pages, and the viewer of a film on DVD must press "play" to view it, and can pause, rewind, or fast forward at their leisure. But, as Veale notes, those choices boil down to an option to engage or disengage with the text, not an opportunity to change it in any way ("'Interactive Cinema'"). Video games, in contrast, offer interaction that actually affects the text. Thus, in this context, "interactive" may be understood to mean "allows users to affect the text."

In **tabletop roleplaying games,** creative expression begins to move to the forefront. The fact that all the involved actors are human means that the Gamemaster is expected to provide a unique reaction to anything that the players come up with. Rulebooks often encourage GMs to break rules at their discretion, and, indeed, the fundamental draw of the medium for many tabletop gamers is the chance to act out interesting stories, with game systems used to provide goals and some degree of structure.

Tabletop RPGs are **undefined**. There are no hard boundaries on what players can do, and, indeed, this is one of the big advantages of the genre. Many players create custom adventures for their game sessions, which are one-of-a-kind experiences. Some game systems offer supplements that provide details on a specific adventure, but it would be surprising if players got through one without doing something not explicitly covered in the rules.

Tabletop RPG's are also obviously **interactive**.

Improvisational storytelling makes up the far end of the spectrum. "Improvisational storytelling" is a catch all term that could include things like performing improv comedy, telling a story a sentence at a time around a circle, or engaging in pure "make-believe." Rules are minimal, if existent, and the participants are often encouraged to be as creative as possible.

Improvisational storytelling is **undefined,** as well as **interactive**.

What's the point? Video games are uniquely situated between **well-defined**, **non-interactive** media like film and literature, and **unbounded**, **interactive** experiences like tabletop roleplaying games and improvisational storytelling. This uniqueness has led to enormous difficulties in creating a coherent terminology for games criticism. There is an anxiety reflected across the literature about the need to produce new methodologies for studying games.[4] There

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4   See Juul, Koskima, Consalvo and Dutton, Hall and Baird. Simons pokes fun at the trend, saying that "In an effort to stake out an exclusive niche for games studies,… scholars succumbed to the endless academic game of naming and labelling… This, however, is a quite sterile and obsolete game that nobody can ever

seems to be a consensus that techniques for analyzing film and literature are unsuited for video game analysis. It is also generally acknowledged that there is no significant critical establishment devoted to the study of traditional games. As Juul puts it "it should be possible to simply look at the aesthetic vocabulary we were already using for non-electronic games. However, it doesn't exist" ("What computer games can and can't do").[5]

This desire for a sort of "holy grail" of games analysis has spawned an innumerable number of proposed frameworks: Polti ratios, unit operations, Model-View-Controller pattern, Formal Abstract Design tools, etc.[6] These frameworks are often deeply rooted in structuralist thinking, and attempts to define games in objective terms, which is not particularly surprising. It is understandable that those with an interest in games would look for a structured, systemic approach to understanding them, for several reasons.

First, many games are non-linear experiences, or, at the very least, have a significant amount of variability inherent in the design. Defining games in terms of their systems is a decent way to attempt to make sense of the chaos that creates. After all, since any given game is **interactive**, I can't be sure how a player will engage with it, but since they're **well-defined**, I *can* be sure that he/she will come into contact with systems X, Y and Z. So, instead of looking at player experience, the focus shifts towards mechanics.

win" ("Narrative, Games, and Theory").

5   Juul isn't *quite* right here. Attempts to analyze traditional games do exist, and video games critics *have* attempted to use them to examine the medium. Economic "game theory," for example, is at least nominally the study of games. Simons has proposed taking lessons from this discipline in order to further the study of narratology, arguing that the fields converge at a number of important points ("Narrative, Games, and Theory"). Other, more abstract studies of "games" and "play" exist, but they frequently devolve into deconstructionist ponderings about the state of reality as much as anything else (See Sniderman's "Unwritten Rules;" for example). In either case, the theories have not been eagerly adapted by games critics.

6   See Hall and Baird, "Improving Computer Game Narrative;" Bogost, "Unit Operations;" Smed and Hakonen, "Towards a Definition;" Church, "Formal Abstract Design Tools."

Second, focusing on game mechanics is more in line with our established cultural paradigms for examining movies and books. Those mediums are **non-interactive**, and so every aspect of the text is universal. A reader will progress linearly through a novel from beginning to end, with no variation in the text. Thus, critical frameworks for these media need not concern themselves much with differences in reader experience, as the majority of the work will be more or less the same for everyone.

And so, as much as games critics want to distance themselves from old-school textual analysis, they frequently go about looking at video games in a similar fashion. We would like to be able to examine a games set of mechanics and form sound critical analysis of it based on that alone, neatly avoiding the subjectivity of the individual playthrough that does not fit cleanly into our existing understanding of what critical analysis is. After all, it would be silly for a paper on *War and Peace* to go into detail about how the critic experienced the text—it does not matter how fast he read it, or where he paused to do something else.[7] Thus, it makes sense that games critics, which often come from standard academic backgrounds, are leery of privileging the messy subjective playthrough.

Yet, to marginalize the variability of the individual experience is to marginalize exactly what makes games unique. And indeed, there seems to be something lacking in these strict structures of game analysis. The paradigms are either too general to be interesting, or they are cumbersome, byzantine hierarchies that even the authors may have trouble wielding with any sort of success. Additionally, this focus on mechanics in a vacuum leads to lengthy, dry-as-a-bone exposition of the game's basic premise, core mechanics, secondary mechanics, tertiary mechanics, and so on, until the actual fun of the thing has been crushed under a massive pile of dissected systems. Reading about game mechanics is rarely interesting. Playing with game

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7   Again, generalizations are problematic. There are situations where such disclosure can be interesting, but it must be acknowledged that such instances are, at the very least, extremely unconventional.

mechanics, seeing how they feel, how they interact, is interesting. To pretend otherwise is a serious mistake.

One alternative to this structuralist approach is to include descriptions of individual playthroughs in an attempt to capture the essence of player agency that is so important to games. In the past, this approach has not been particularly sensible. A playthrough of *Doom*, for example, is constrained enough that there may be little interest in examining an individual's slightly different interactions with mechanics. However, there are games, such as *Minecraft*, where the individual playthrough is central to the experience, and other, such as *The Sims*, in which the playthrough is what breathes life into the game. Thus, while the individual playthrough has not had much currency in games criticism to this point, I argue that it has the potential to become an essential aspect of studying games narratives.

Narrative in Games: The Story so Far

Focusing on the playthrough would provide an alternative to the current strategies that attempt to deal with narratives in games, strategies that are often wanting. In a broad sense, games critics generally fall in two categories with regards to story: ludologists, or narratologists. Ludologists claim that game narratives lie somewhere between inconsequential and detrimental to the form. On the other hand, as the name would imply, narratologists argue that narratives are, in fact, central to the gaming experience. Unfortunately, both schools of thought have their problems.

Ludology is certainly the more polished of the two theoretical frameworks. In "A Clash between Game and Narrative", Juul argues that games and narratives are at opposition because of player agency, the fact that the player is situated within the temporal frame of the game instead of outside of it, and because many game stories are disconnected from their mechanical elements. He comes to the conclusion that narrative in games "tends to be isolated from, or even

work against the computer-gaminess of a game" (Juul, "Clash"). His essay argues these points quite convincingly, however, we must take note that Juul is implicitly defining "narrative" as something developer-authored that a player interacts with passively. And, again, for much of gaming history this was true. But to argue that "you can't have narration and interactivity at the same time," as he does, is to overlook the games, cited numerous times in this essay already, in which player agency is crucial to creating the narrative. It would be absurd to claim that a play session of *The Sims* has no interactive narrative, or even that the narrative of *The Sims* is in conflict with interactivity in any significant fashion. The core of the game is the idea that you, as the player, are crafting the story of your Sims' lives.

That's not to say Juul gets it all wrong. His points do a very good job at pointing out some of the inherent tensions that will be present in any video game with designed narrative content. His piece is, perhaps, a bit dismissive of the potential designed narrative experiences like Interactive Fiction or adventure games have, but, well, there's no accounting for taste.

He certainly does better than the narratologists, who seem unable to do much at all. There exist a great deal of interesting analyses of game stories (which very often incorporate personal play narratives), but these generally occur outside the realm of academic discourse, in blogs or forums. In terms of games as a whole, narratologists seem to be able to do little other than propose the sorts of structuralist frameworks that have little use in application.

Interestingly, there are signs of an understanding that subjectivity is important to analysis. Dianne Carr notes that "textual analysis of a game should respond to the fact that games are played," but, after looking at a few options, she is unable to recommend a method by which to do that ("Un-Situated Play"). Very frequently, narratologists dodge the issue by conducting an analysis on a "generic playthrough," a model that attempts to capture, in general, the sorts of things most players will go through. Although clever, the use of a "generic playthrough" is often about as exciting as it sounds.

Additionally, this model is acceptable only for games that offer relatively uniform experiences. But, more and more, games are escaping those confines. It is possible to construct a "generic playthrough" a game like *Minecraft* or *The Walking Dead*, but doing so strips away a great deal of what makes those games interesting: player control over the narrative.

For example, Telltale Games' *The Walking Dead* has as its core mechanic a dialogue system that is constantly presenting the player with choices about what their character will say or do. Beyond this, the game often asks players to make tough decisions about what course of action to take. These games are sometimes criticized for being "deceptive," as decisions/dialogue choices sometimes produce very similar results. However, as writers of *The Walking Dead* point out, the stories that emerge are still very different. Vanaman and Rodkin, in a talk at NYC Practice, argued that "At the end of this talk, you could politely clap,…you could give us a standing ovation,… you could call bullshit…or you could just walk out. If we were to sit up here and cry in response…there would be four very, very different stories… It would be one response but… It would mean four very, very different things" ("Narrative Choice"). With every choice, the player is constructing their character's narrative, a narrative that will be different for almost everyone who plays the game. Thus, it would be possible to analyze the "generic narrative" about *The Walking Dead* and cover the main beats of the story, but to do so robs critics of the opportunity to fully engage with the specific player narratives that form the heart of the game.

A game like *Minecraft* is even harder to analyze from a generic point of view. There is no explicit story in *Minecraft*, and the possibility space is so large that it would be impossible to enumerate all of the potential narratives that could emerge, even in general terms. To analyze the "stories" that emerge from *Minecraft*, one is forced to look at a specific playthrough, simply because it is impossible to do anything else.

Games of this sort are becoming more and more popular, and require a new approach. We cannot study the singular story of these games, because they have none. Instead, we must

study the individual stories that emerge out of them. In doing so, we gain interesting perspective

into game mechanics, and get the chance to delve into unexpected, often fascinating, emergent

tales.[8]

Case Study: *Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri*

I want to demonstrate this approach by using it to analyze a partial playthrough of *Sid*

Meier's Alpha Centauri, published in 1999 by Firaxis.

Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri is a *Civilization*-style turn based empire building game. It

was designed by Sid Meier and Brian Reynolds who, after leaving MicroProse to join Firaxis in

1996, wanted to create another game in the vein of *Civilization*, but lacked the rights to the

Civilization IP. Instead, Firaxis began work on *Alpha Centauri*, which takes place on the planet

Chiron in the Alpha Centauri system, in the years following 2100. Gameplay is similar to

traditional *Civilization* games: the player lands on Planet with one base, and they must expand,

building new bases, improving the land, researching technology, and occasionally waging war

with other factions. The game's opening cinematic presents us with the minimal backstory:

> Earth: 2060. A small group of colonists leaves the ravages of Earth for a distant planet
>
> orbiting Alpha Centauri's primary star. Their ship, the United Nations starship *Unity*,
>
> carries them on their journey to a new world, and a new hope for human kind. Along the
>
> way, a reactor malfunction damages the *Unity*, precipitating a crisis among the ships
>
> seven most powerful leaders. As they enter the Alpha Centauri system, the crew splits

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8   Side Note: While not established in the world of games criticism, this approach is extremely common in casual discourse about games. Forums and blogs are filled with interesting narratives that came out of play sessions, and many game players enjoy games like this because of the way they create "tellable moments." On a larger scale, the "Let's Play" phenomena is very often the creation of stories out of video games with expressive mechanics. Most Let's Play videos are fairly simplistic in terms of thematic content, but they nonetheless demonstrate some of the potential a more subjective approach to games criticism may have. It is interesting to note, as well, that, due to their **non-interactive** natures, it is very rare to see similar approaches applied to film or literature.

into seven distinct factions, divided not by nationality, but by ideology and their vision

for the new world. After the ship breaks apart, the seven leaders guide their chosen crew

to the surface of planet, seeking their destiny beneath an alien sky. (*Sid Meier's Alpha*

Centauri)

Figure 1: Title screen

Choosing "Start Game," I am presented with seven portraits of the seven faction leaders.

Interestingly, while all of the factions have significant mechanical advantages and disadvantages,

the game will not tell me what they are at this stage. Instead, I am presented merely with a

portrait, and a quote. The focus is entirely on the faction leader's personalities, not their

mechanical benefits. This is an interesting choice, to be sure, and it already tells us a lot about

what is important in the game. *SMAC* is a game about warring ideologies, all attempting to carve

out a place on Planet. Their mechanics are important, but their constructed personalities are as

well. One get the sense that the game wants to take you out of min-maxing decisions for a

moment, and commit to the story, pick a person instead of a set of mechanics.

To that end, the portraits and quotes give a good sense of what the factions are all about.

For instance, here is the information for faction leader Col. Corazon Santiago.
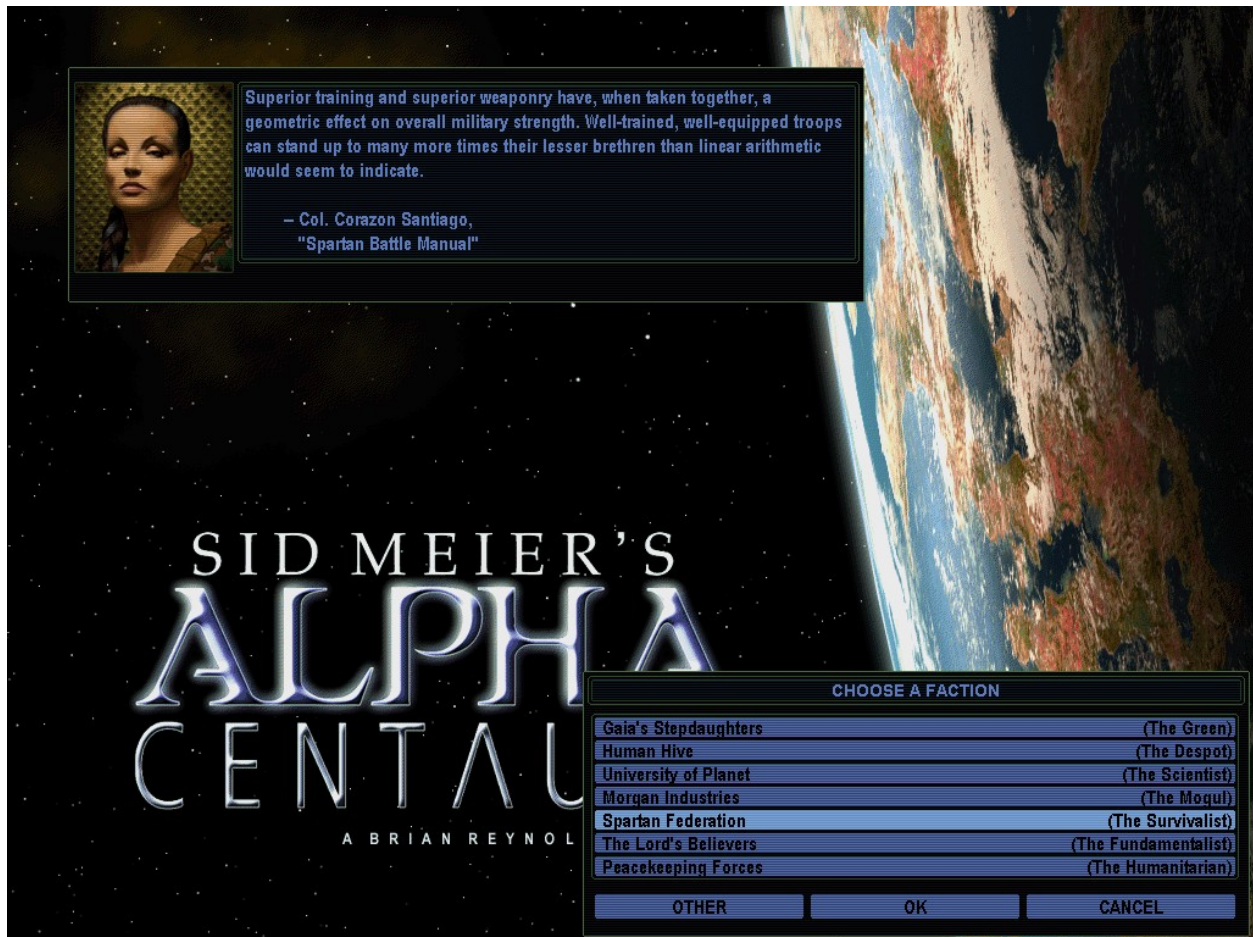

Figure 1: The Survivalist

It's obvious what Santiago stands for. Her faction is named the Spartan Federation, a

rather obvious allusion that is nevertheless effective. Santiago is pictured in front of a stern metal

background, with hard, austere lighting. Her hair is in a military style, and she's clearly in some

sort of combat uniform. This is the only picture the player will see of Santiago all game, so it's

important to make it iconic as possible. Every detail in the small icon has been tuned to convey

exactly one message, and it's effective.

Santiago's quote furthers this image, as well as hinting at some of the mechanical benefits of her faction. In game, Spartan troops are indeed "well-trained," getting morale boosts when they are produced. There's also a nod to her troops being "well-equipped," which is borne out in the fact that prototyping new, more advanced unit designs doesn't cost money. And, of course, the whole quote further indicates that the Spartan playstyle is one based largely on aggression.

This excellent use of iconography transfers to the other factions as well. In the end, I choose to play as CEO Nwabudike Morgan. I like to play a slower game, and Morgan's focus on wealth allows rapid, flexible infrastructure growth, and big bonuses to research. Plus, he has a

dignified, appealing image.

Figure 1: A Class Act

I set up some of the optional rules, pick my difficulty, and press start.

Figure 1: PlanetFall.

This is the beginning of the game, Mission year 2101. I selected the "No Unity Survey" option in the rules menu, so I have no idea what Planet looks like. I'm faced with a beacon of 21 squares of light, and a whole planet of alien darkness. I'm completely alone.

Every game of Alpha Centauri begins like this: a single outpost of civilization in the midst of a literal "dark continent." Right now, I'm all I have; I'm totally alone. There's an enormous feeling of isolation, and an amazing visual indicator of just how much I don't know. I have to get out, and explore.

As I do, I realize Planet is hostile. The basic squares produce very little resources on their own, and the red blotches the screenshot are called "xenofungus," terrain which inhibits movement and spawns enemy native life. The beginning turns of the game are a hard scrabble

for resources, and countless tough decisions. I have to expand as fast as possible. Real estate on Planet is finite, and once it's claimed by another faction, I'll have to start a war to get it. So, in the beginning, I've got to build bases as fast as possible, and grab as much as I can get. Even though this basic strategy is set, I've still got a number of tough decisions to make. Every base needs to build a defensive unit, a 'former, and a colony pod, but in what order? Defensive units will prevent my bases from attacks from native life, but don't do anything to help me expand. 'Formers (terraformers) are necessary to start improving the resource sparse surface of Planet, but are expensive, and take a while to get results. Colony pods are how I accomplish my vital goal of expansion, but are also expensive, and reduce my city's population by one, decreasing its productivity. As Morgan, I'm also at a penalty for unit upkeep, so having all three around at the same time diverts materials from production. I constantly feel pressed for resources, and I'm spreading myself as thin as possible to try and grab as much as I can hold.

Before long, I've carved out a sizable chunk of territory on the surface. Scouts find a section of territory called the "Uranium Flats," which provides significant energy bonuses to bases in the area. I seed the Flats with bases as densely as is valuable, and the north quickly begins to thrive.

Figure 1: Uranium Flats

In the south, things aren't going so well. Massive swaths of xenofungus have created a very hostile environment. I couldn't build bases close together, and those that I did build had trouble with resources. Additionally, the xenofungus was spawning a great deal of mindworms, which are the hostile native life on Planet. These mindworms were wreaking havoc, destroying terrain improvements, preventing expansion, and in a few cases, destroying bases.

Figure 1: Mindworms in the South

It was clear something had to be done. So I built up a modest force of attack vehicles, and started to clear out the worms. The mission was successful, and my bases were safe, but Morgan's poor upkeep rating meant that upkeep costs were becoming a serious issue. I wanted each base to have a defensive unit and a 'former, which meant that any standing army had a significant drain on my production. So, after the police action in the jungles of the south, I disbanded the troops. My empire was almost entirely defenseless, but at this point, I figured getting a solid infrastructure together was more important.

As my faction grew, I began constructing "secret projects," resource heavy facilities that provide enormous benefits. One of the first was something called "The Virtual World," which in

essence, allows a science-oriented base facility to also make citizens happier. The text of the

project says only "network nodes help drones," and the name "The Virtual World" brings to

mind people enjoying a fun session on the holodeck. Imagine my surprise when I completed the

project, and saw this:

Figure 1: The Virtual World

After completing the project, a video of this guy twitching around plays for a good 20

seconds, while a disembodied voice talks about how life is nothing more than your brain reacting

to chemicals. It's disturbing, and it clashed with the "good guy" narrative I was constructing for

myself. After all, I was a builder- focused on improving my people's lives as much as possible. I

build this secret project to give poor people video games, not turn them into weird naked

cyborgs! Everything else in *Alpha Centauri* allows you to view yourself as a benevolent dictator,

but many of the secret project videos shatter that illusion.

Soon after that jolt, I finished exploring the continent, and confirmed a suspicion that had

been nagging at me: I was alone on the landmass. On the one hand, this was nice—I didn't have

to deal with any querulous opponents horning in on my land claims. On the other, it was… odd.

With no obvious external pressures, growth slowed. The south remained undeveloped, after all,

no one was going to come and take it from me. The game got… boring. I knew intellectually

that I was still competing, but there wasn't any real pressure, no obvious force to struggle

against. My rate of growth dropped off. I felt lonely!

So, I set sail. One of the coastal cities in the North, Morgan Construction, produced a

warship, the best money could buy, outfitted with plasma steel armor and a particle impactor. I

sailed off into the black void, eager to meet new people.

Figure 1: Setting Sail

It wasn't long before I ran into Col. Santiago. Naturally, I panicked. The mindworm

hunting force had showed me the intense difficulties I'd have in fielding an army, and my bases

were scantily defended. Santiago had presumably been building military infrastructure, and I had no doubt that she would wipe the floor with me if we tangled. So when she offered a treaty, I signed it with glee. Soon enough we were trading technology and generally getting along quite nicely. I pressed her for contact information for the other factions—I needed more interaction. She gave me a few, then, apparently got bored with the conversation, and hung up.

Delighted, I immediately called up Yang, and had a much less friendly meeting. Yang's might was "unsurpassed," and he knew it. I got little of use from him, but was bullied into giving over some of my research. He refused to tell me anything about his surroundings or other contacts, either. Worst of all though, was his offer to sign a pact with me, provided I declared war on Santiago. This was an incredible offer; pacts are strong alliances, and to make one with the current frontrunner would've been a great boon, especially because Yang seemed inexplicably furious with me. But I had *just* signed a treaty with Santiago. You can break treaties in Alpha Centauri, but your "integrity" score goes down, and the other factions will trust you less, and generally dislike you. So, I had a choice: break the first diplomatic agreement I had made on Planet, or put myself at serious risk of death by Yang. In the end, I declined the pact. The integrity hit probably would've been worth it, but I wanted to play as an honest leader, and I wasn't going to break my treaty just to curry favor with this despot.

Yang quickly made his farewells. I called up the next faction leader on the list, Zakharov, the scientist. A fellow man of reason, we traded a great deal of technology, although he refused to give me any map information.

Last on the list was Pravin Lal. Lal is a bit of an odd duck in the *Alpha Centauri* lineup, because he's the only one of the faction leaders who's not crazy. His faction is called "the Peacekeepers," and their stated agenda is to try and maintain the humanitarian ideals that the expedition was launched under. Mechanically, he's fairly bland, with no strong advantages or disadvantages. He's sort of a foil to the rest of the cast.

The thing is, I liked Lal, and I can't really tell you why. I'm not sure if he's programmed to be affable, or if it was merely a conflux of game systems that decided he was going to be the guy I bonded with. Maybe it was all in my head, after all, he is the only faction leader who's obviously smiling in his picture. But I felt like we had hit it off, as odd as that sounds, and I looked forward to seeing more of him.

There were still 2 factions I didn't know, but the "human" contact felt like a breath of fresh air. My long isolation meant that there were scores of technology that I had to offer to the others, and scores they had to offer me. It felt like I was rocketing forward, buoyed by an explosion of intellectual contact. I had a sense of entering a global community: trading info and coming into a complex web of enmity and alliances that I didn't yet fully understand. It was invigorating, and after my long isolation, it felt like the game had really begun in earnest.

I'm going to cut the narrative here, and spent a moment looking at this playthrough as a story of isolation. You could write a lot on that initial moment in *Alpha Centauri*, where you're so completely and utterly alone. We're afraid of the dark, but in *Alpha Centauri* we're forced to confront it, set out, and do or die. And when we do, we meet others, and even if they're annoying, they're what makes the game compelling. After all, those six other faction leaders are the only things in the game that really feel like humans. Sure, my bases are full of people, but they all look identical. It's hard to attach to them. Humans crave community, we need others to survive and thrive; it's part of our essence. In *Alpha Centauri,* the other faction leaders fill that need. Playing without the other factions is just depressing, a lonely man's futile struggle against a barren native landscape. Decades from home, no one cares about your accomplishments, secret projects and technology. Without the other leaders, there is only you.

Alpha Centauri recognizes that, and forces you into community. The game allows you a lot of leeway to tinker with the rules, but there's one thing you can't do: remove factions. It's impossible to play a standard game with less than all of the leaders present, and I think that's a

deliberate choice. So much of *Alpha Centauri* is about contact with these other humans that to remove even one of them would significantly hurt the game.

Conclusion

Privileging the subjective isn't suitable for every game. But, if a game is about a player affected narrative, studying a specific instance of that narrative may allow us holistic insight into how the mechanics work in conjunction together. It may also simply be an interesting piece of writing in its own right. I know that I personally enjoy hearing other's gameplay stories, and I often come away with a deeper appreciation of the game in question. More and more, games are coming into their own and playing to their strengths as an interactive medium. As the medium moves forward, attempts to "objectively" analyze games will become less and less able to engage with core aspects of the game playing experience. Embracing the uniqueness of games, and giving more focus to the subjective, allows us to take an exciting new look at games, and, in doing so, understand them and us better.

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