

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: South of the Circle

Platform: Macintosh operating systems

Genre: Adventure game

Release Date: October 30th, 2020

Developer: State of Play Games Limited

Publisher: State of Play Games Limited

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: State of Play

Overview

South of the Circle is a narrative adventure game set in 1964, about a Cambridge academic enlisted to conduct climate research in Antarctica. After his plane crashes and the pilot is badly hurt, Peter's survival is up to him. Peter needs to find help in the Arctic cold while dealing with vivid memories of his past, especially memories of his lover Clara.

Characters

- **Peter:** The game's protagonist and the character you play as. A climate scientist and academic at Cambridge who's a little shy and insecure. He has been at Cambridge for three years now and hasn't made much progress on his final paper. A paper that can give him the career he wants.
- **Floyd:** Floyd is the pilot of the plane that crashes in the arctic with Peter. The crash caused his leg to break so he stays by the plane while Peter goes out to find help. He has prejudices towards communists and Russians and keeps a gun on board.
- **Clara:** An ambitious lecturer at Cambridge who's trying to get her paper proposal approved. She is a feminist in a time where women in academia were not taken in consideration.
- **Professor Hargreaves:** A sexist Cambridge professor who belittles Peter's research until Peter finishes his paper. He thinks protesters of nuclear power at Cambridge are against Britain and hurt Cambridge's reputation. He is also against women joining academics. Considered the main villain of the game.

- **Russian Engineer:** A burly Russian man whose vehicle broke down in the Arctic. He was sent there to study radiation and keep an eye on British bomb tests.
- **Molly:** A friend of Clara's. Molly protests the use of nuclear technology and wants Britain to put an end to the war. She becomes detained by the government for suspicions of communist activity. After being released, she leaves Cambridge.
- **Peter's Dad:** Peter's dad teaches young Peter about the struggles of life and what it means to be a man. He has a short temper and is verbally abusive.

Breakdown

An intensely beautiful emotional experience. South of the Circle is set in the Cold War era where Peter, a young Cambridge academic, is sent to Antarctica to research the climate activity in the area. The game begins when Peter's plane crashes in the middle of nowhere, Antarctica, and the pilot Floyd has badly hurt his leg. Peter needs to survive and find help in the Arctic cold while experiencing vivid memories of his life. This is a very narrative-driven game with heavy dialogue and long cutscenes that highlight the story from Peter's point of view. The gameplay is minimal, the main mechanic the user controls is the emotional response Peter gives to the other characters in the game. One to three symbols may appear on the screen for the player to pick so Peter can react to the other characters. These symbols range from "panicked" to "strong" to "negative". In addition, the player can choose to make a decision for Peter when prompted with one. For example, Peter can choose between going to a nuclear weapon protest or working on his paper. These choices become traits that follow Peter on his journey.

The story follows Peter's survival in the arctic, his main goal is to find a radio or someone that can help him and Floyd. However, Peter finds no one on his journey except for secrets of the Cold War, such as radioactive materials and bomb tests. Peter's mental slowly starts to decline as his memories blend with his reality. The blur is represented by beautiful transitions that match Peter's actions. For example, while Peter drives a car in the middle of the snow to get to what looks like a Norwegian base, the landscape changes abruptly and shows him driving a car in Britain with Clara, his lover. This smooth intercutting between memories and real-life makes the player experience Peter's psyche and learns more about Peter's life and personality. As we step into his memories, we learn about Peter's shyness and awkward steps to winning Clara over, we learn of his relationship with his father, we learn of different ways masculinity affects the character's lives and the fears of the Cold War.

In the end, Peter's relationship with Clara ends and Peter loses all the traits he has gained from his decisions as Clara remembers Peter's decisions differently. For example, if we chose to move into a blue house with her, she remembers it as red. This shows the gaps in Peter's point of view and how his recollection of events is filled with flaws. In the end, with the help of a Russian engineer that is also stuck in the arctic, and a barrel of fuel, the plane flies again. Then, as the player thinks everything is fine, a nuclear bomb detonates in front of the plane and the experience comes to an end. The ending is overwhelming because the characters we root for die, and the player can't help the outcome, no matter the emotional responses we choose throughout the game.

Strongest Element

The strongest element of *South of the Circle* is the blur of memory and reality we are experiencing through Peter's mental decline in the arctic. The decline starts simply with flashbacks of awkward but sweet memories showing the beginning of his relationship with Clara, talks with his professor over his undeveloped research, and dark childhood memories of his father's verbal abuse. However, as we continue on our adventure the real and the fake blend together. On his way to a Norwegian base where he hopes to find help, Peter drives a car through the thick snow of the arctic. Suddenly, one of his friends appears wearing normal fall clothes and drives with him while street lights and pavements markings appear in the thick snow. Not long after, the friend, street lights, and markings disappear as he completely runs out of gas. As he makes his way further on foot, he sees a "FUNFAIR" ride in the middle of the snowstorm which prompts him to remember his first date with Clara at the same fair. However, there is no funfair in Antarctica, it isn't really there. Peter's memories blend with his reality, making it hard for him to tell the difference. The fair and the streetlights are a mere fragment of Peter's memory replicated in the reality he is currently in. Peter's memories help him survive the cold and keep him going so he can reach his goal. However, they also blur the line between what is really there and what isn't. What was a simple funfair, turned out to be a bunker for radioactive materials.

Unsuccessful Element

The main unsuccessful element in the game is the lack of control the player has over the story. Due to the minimal gameplay, the game almost feels like watching a long movie. *South of the Circle* allows us to choose the emotional response Peter gives by pressing down on the response symbol, but the response choices minimally affect the outcome of the game. The game creates an illusion of freedom for the player but it's not a game that can be played multiple times, and the story's ending doesn't change in a drastic manner even if you replay the game and choose different emotional responses. This lack of gameplay and freedom could have mixed responses for players.

Highlight

The highlight of the game is the transitions between the present and past. *South of the Circle*'s transitions between Peter's memories and his reality are created with smooth intercutting. The transitions to the past replicate the actions Peter is doing in the present. For example, in the present, Peter rows a boat to get to a ship on the other side of a river, this scene is then intercut with a scene of Peter learning how to row when he was young while his father critiques him. These transitions are not only satisfying to experience but also showcase Peter's recollections and the blur between his present reality and his memories.

Critical Reception:

Source: ScreenRant

Reviewer: Zackerie Fairfax

Score: 4.5/5

"If games could win Oscars, *South of the Circle* would definitely be in the running for a few. Few games can take players to the brink of despair and back while spinning a narrative that

evokes such raw emotion from its players...” This summarizes Fairfax’s thoughts on South of the Circle accurately. Fairfax does agree that while the gameplay is minimal, South of the Circle’s beautifully written story stays compelling from the beginning to the end.

Source: Forbes

Reviewer: Andy Robertson

Score: Not available

Robertson’s take on South of the Circle is accompanied by John Lau, the creative producer of the game. In his review, Robertson’s talk with Lau about South of the Circle’s interactive experience that uses “full motion capture of actors and cinematic camera angles. This makes it more palatable to a non-game-playing audience.” Robertson even compares South of the Circle to shows like *The Wire* due to the camera angles used and the portrayals of power and masculinity in the game.

Lessons:

- Every part of the game’s design should feed into the narrative. In South of the Circle, all the elements of the game such as visual/sound design, gameplay, transitions, and voice-acting come together to support the story. Intense moments like Peter almost falling off a cliff make us feel an important emotional response by using all the design elements combined together.
- Gameplay is a very important part of the player’s experience that we cannot ignore. South of the Circle’s heavy dialogue and narrative-driven experience could make some players stay away from the game, as there is little gameplay happening. This lack of exploration, control, and freedom could negatively affect the player’s experience.
- A game doesn’t need an intricate detail-oriented art style to elicit an emotional response in the player. The art style in South of the Circle is simple and doesn’t focus on hyper-realistic details to make the story stand out. The design lets the story breathe and unfold naturally so the art style doesn’t undermine the story.

Summation

South of the circle is an unbelievably gorgeous narrative-driven game. The art style is unique and simple to showcase the story rather than superfluous details. The gameplay is simple and accessible, and the sound design is eerie and intense whenever it needs to be. South of the Circle is truly a game driven by dialogue built on promises and emotions. It keeps us interested by revealing bits and pieces of information through memories and dialogue while sprinkling in some action with intense emotional consequences.