



TRANSISTOR

GAME NARRATIVE REVIEW

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Platform

Windows, PS4, iOS, Switch

Genre

Action RPG

Release Date

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Developer

Supergiant Games

Publisher

Supergiant Games

Designers

Greg Kasavin, Amir Rao

OVERVIEW



Supergiant Games's second release, *Transistor*, presents a tale as old as time: a quest to save the people and, along the way, reunite with one's lover. While this formula is tried and true, it can also be tiring. What makes the game enthralling, however, is the world and scenario that the game's protagonist, Red, is forced into, and the way the game presents its mysteries for the player to unravel. *Transistor* wants you to delve into its world just as much as its combat in a myriad of ways. Whether or not it succeeds in that more often than not is up to the player.

CHARACTERS



RED (pictured right)

The protagonist and player character. A famous singer in the city of Cloudbank whose voice has been stolen, she is embarking to save Unknown and defeat the Camerata.



(pictured left) UNKNOWN

Red's hired protection... and romantic partner. After being killed just before the beginning of the game, his consciousness became trapped inside the *Transistor*.

SYBIL REISZ (pictured right)

Former city event planner and member of the Camerata, the group who secretly controls the city and makes use of the Process. Her hubris caused the incident at the start of the game, leading to the city's and the Camerata's downfall.



GRANT KENDRALL

The de facto leader of the Camerata, and Asher Kendall's partner. He is the longest serving public administrator in Cloudbank history.



ASHER KENDRALL

Member of the Camerata and Grant Kendall's partner. An influential writer and editor for the OVC, the state-sanctioned news and public opinion aggregation organization in Cloudbank.

(pictured left) ROYCE BRACKET

Royce Bracket: Member of the Camerata. A famous city architect who discovered the existence of the Process and the Transistor.

BREAKDOWN



I felt like I had a horrible case of writer's block trying to figure out how to write this breakdown. It seemed like this game had a lot to say, but I couldn't figure out how to say it myself. That's when I realized that the game doesn't go out of its way to present its story directly to the player, either. Rather, it requires the player to be attentive to everything going on in the game, not just Unknown's husky voice emanating from the Transistor. For a game that is structurally very linear, it doesn't feel as such, and that is aided by the many avenues in which the world's lore, story exposition, and evolving narrative are presented to the player. At the same time, however, these presentation methods don't feel like they are being presented at all, and for the most part are a rather naturally occurring part of this game and it's world. Let's take a look at this by starting at the beginning.

CUTSCENES

The game opens with a cutscene, or could it be a cutaway? From the start of the game, the line between what constitutes a "cutscene" and "cutaway" is blurred. Traditionally the most intrusive method of story delivery, this is lessened in Transistor thanks to a consistent visual presentation between the cutscenes and the overworld, with most cutscenes comprising of a singular still or moving piece of artwork. Cutscenes are also usually paired with a very obvious in-game reason for being triggered, and so feel more expected, rather than activating and saying to the player: "You reached this point in-game so you're being forced in a cutscene now." One example of this is when Red returns to the place of her attempted murder and reminisces on the events of the previous night. Or a cutaway that triggers when she returns to her high rise apartment to relax with Unknown (who's still trapped in the Transistor).

NARRATION

The catalyzing event of the game, an attempt on Red's life by a mysterious group called the Camerata, results in the loss of Red's voice as well as the bodily death of her presumed bodyguard/lover, Unknown, trapping his consciousness and voice inside the Camerata's weapon, the Transistor. After the weapon teleports them away from their assailants, the player then sets off on

the game's adventure, controlling Red, now wielding the newfound Transistor. Thus the player is attended by a constant companion in the form of a talking sword that is able to vocalize reactions to Red's actions and the game's events.

This is a similar situation to the narration in Supergiant's first game, *Bastion*, except the narration is embedded directly in the world, rather than as a separate entity looking in on the events of the game. This means that Unknown, speaking from the Transistor, is experiencing and being affected by the events of the game just as the player and Red are. This is especially true considering that the Transistor itself plays a huge in-world role within the city of Cloudbank and the monstrous infestation taking it over, the Process. This is most noticeable during a portion of the game in which Red confronts the "Spine", a gruesome, hulking manifestation of the Process. Unknown's consciousness and speech seems to slowly deteriorate within the weapon the closer it gets to the Spine—that is until Red is able to defeat it.

Additionally, because Red loses her voice at the beginning of the game, Unknown, as the only one who is able to vocalize between the two, is able to directly convey his thoughts and deductions on information uncovered by the two of them. This gives context to motivations and actions Red takes. Sometimes, though, Red does something that Unknown doesn't expect, and it takes him a moment to figure it out, exclaiming things such as, "Hey, I thought we were... Oh."

This also means he can comment on the world around them, providing context to the city of Cloudbank and his and Red's relationship: "This place is usually busy", "Good to see Junction Jan's still delivers", "I didn't like high rise very much until I learned you lived here". These small comments add a touch of human color to the places they visit.



OVC TERMINALS

The OVC is the state-controlled news, public opinion, data aggregation, and policy research organization. Their publically accessible digital information terminals stationed throughout the city offer the latest news, public opinion polls, and services.

In-world, whoever is using the terminal (in the case of the game, Red) is able to respond to whatever the terminal is presenting, whether it be leaving a comment on a news article, answering a poll, or ordering from a menu.

In-game, however, the OVC terminals don't serve to offer player agency with some kind of payoff. Their primary role in the game itself is to subtly provide background context on the society and culture of Cloudbank through articles and polls, and news on the current status of the city in response to the events of the game. These more serious terminals are punctuated by more light-hearted ones, such as a poll asking the user to predict the outcome of a local game, or order from Junction Jan's sandwich shop. Unknown reacts to all of these terminals, and responds to comments or poll choices Red selects. There's even a few terminals in which Red uses the comment field to type out messages for Unknown to read, and they have a short back and forth conversation. Those ones are often my favorite, as they're the only time in which the player hears or reads any kind of direct words from Red outside of her songs.



FUNCTIONS

More straight forward ways that information about the world is delivered to the player is through function descriptions. Functions are abilities you can use by assigning to active, upgrade, or passive slots for different effects. In-world, each function is derived from a living person that the Camerata, using the Transistor (or Process) has "integrated" (which if you can catch the hint, means that they are no longer "living"). The Camerata's reasons for doing this are revealed over the course of the game, but playing as Red, you're able to uncover more information about each individual person as you



use their function in each kind of slot. What you end up with are text entries written by the Camerata detailing the background and careers of these high-ranking, creative-minded, and influential people of interest that have been integrated. These entries provide hints behind why these people might have been chosen by the Camerata to be integrated, as well as information on the setting of Cloudbank that the player is traversing.

LIMITERS

Limiter descriptions, on the other hand, provide information on the thing ravaging Cloudbank, the Process. This is fitting, as limiters are essentially difficulty switches that you can activate to make the Process more powerful in various ways in return for additional experience. The descriptions for the limiters, unlocked after using that limiter in battle at least once, seem to be transcriptions of Royce Bracket voicing his thoughts on the behavior of certain types of Process during his research. This is especially interesting within the game, as you're able to see these entries signed with "Royce" before you even know who he is, and catch a glimpse of his mannerism before you even know what he sounds like.

MUSIC

Red's profession as a musical artist isn't just an arbitrary backstory for the game's protagonist. In the city of Cloudbank, Red is the definition of an upstart celebrity, and the influence she would have on the present-day culture of the city isn't lost on Supergiant. Some of her in-world songs that were recorded and released before she lost her voice appear as part of the game's soundtrack, with real-life vocalist Ashley Barrett taking on the role. In-game, however, other characters like Unknown and Sybil can be heard singing softly along to some of her songs at different points in the game. Concert posters featuring Red's visage and mentions of her in OVC terminals are also seen.

Red's situation as a voiceless singer is highlighted even further by the gameplay. In every in-game location, whenever the player activates Turn(), the arrangement of that location's music changes. The instrumentals adjust to emphasize percussion, and Red begins humming along to the track through a closed mouth.

STRONGEST ELEMENT



While they overtly serve to provide the player with greater context of the world around them, the functions Red uses to take down the Process also play a much subtler, but just as strong symbolic role in the narrative. As mentioned before, each function represents a victim of the Camerata. With each hack and slash on the enemy Process with the use of a function, Red gets one step closer to defeating the Camerata, and the people the functions represent get one step closer to exacting revenge on their killers from beyond the grave. It almost feels like the hubris of the Camerata is coming back to bite them—all the people they killed to become more powerful are now being used to bring about their own demise. It's a strong, sly move that drives home the game's core theme: arrogance and selfishness no matter the intention leads to destruction.

UNSUCCESSFUL ELEMENT



The narration of *Transistor* is a tricky thing to talk about. Out of all the various story delivery methods, it's both the strongest at the weakest at the same time. To talk about why, we need to look once again at the narration of Supergiant's first game, *Bastion*. Despite *Bastion* being narrated by a character who does exist in the world, he is doing so from an omni-present, storytelling standpoint. This gives him all the room he needs to talk about what is happening in the story, where the player is going, character's motivations, etc. The player isn't left in the dark about much of anything.

This is not so with *Transistor*. Understandably, the developers wanted to take a different approach with their second game. The narrator is now an active character in the world and only knows as much as they know in the game at that moment. While this provides a dynamic voice that is reacting to the game, voicing thoughts and theories on what is happening, it can no longer fill the role of providing the player ample information on what is actually happening in the plot without being completely out of character for the narrator and pushing against the fourth wall. To make up for this, cutscenes and cutaways are more common in *Transistor*. However, connection between the events of a cutscene and narration aren't necessarily clearly made either. It's because of this that *Transistor*'s story is much harder to follow than

Bastion's. It requires much more attention to detail from the player to be able to also focus on the other story delivery methods mentioned. This isn't inherently a bad thing, use of more story delivery methods in a game can be really great. But it can also be something that ends up losing the attention of the player in the process (pun intended) if spread too thin. Between the cutscenes and the narration, that's something that Transistor comes dangerously close to doing.

HIGHLIGHT



Warning: Major Spoilers Ahead

In the final scene of the game, Red, after finally defeating Royce and learning she can set Cloudbank on the path to restoration, finds that she can not restore her lover, Unknown, back to life from the Transistor. In classic Romeo and Juliet fashion, she lays down next to the body of Unknown, and kills herself with the Transistor. In doing so, she reunites with Unknown inside the Transistor.

Through this, we learn a number of things. First off, we learn that the scene lingers on Unknown pleading with Red not to kill herself for way too long to not start tearing up. Secondly, we come full circle on the message the game's story is trying to tell us, and what the Camerata warned against in their creed, "When everything changes, nothing changes." The message being, again: arrogance and selfishness no matter the intention leads to destruction.

This all started with the people of the city of Cloudbank becoming selfish and never satisfied with the state of the city, always wanting to change the architecture and civic planning to whatever new trends were sweeping the city. Again and again, everything changed, but the constant desire of the city's citizens never did. The Camerata, specifically Royce, the former city architect, abhorred this, and took it upon himself to create the city he wanted to make. The selfishness of the people and of the Camerata playing off of each other in kind is what made the outbreak of the Process inevitable. But now, enter Red.

At first, Red's motives don't seem selfish. After all, by defeating the Process and the Camerata she'll be able to restore Cloudbank and save Unknown, right? But in this final scene, we learn that these motives were just coincidental. She doesn't do what appears to be the selfless thing to do: stay alive to restore the city to what it once was. Instead, she looks down at Unknown's body and decides that the only way to have him back in her life is to die by the same weapon that ended his. The rest of the city is left to remain a cold, sterile, white for the rest of eternity. One could perhaps interpret her leaving the city in this state to be selfless in a cynical sort of way—a final end to the cycle that started this all, no more suffering. We'll never know for sure. After all, Red can't tell us what she's thinking. Her voice was selfishly taken from her by those that wanted it all for themselves.

CRITICAL RECEPTION



Matt Miller for Game Informer

Transistor

9/10

Danielle Riendeau for Polygon

Transistor Review: A Girl and Her Sword

8.5/10

Yannick LeJacq for Kotaku

Transistor: The Kotaku Review

Should You Play This Game? YES

Most critical reception of Transistor centers around its fantastic combat system. However, when story and worldbuilding is remarked upon, similar praises are sung. The game's various ways of finding more about the narrative and the city of Cloudbank didn't pass by the reviewers. Matt Miller for Game Informer writes:

“Scattered terminals and occasional encounters with other sentient beings offer insight into the city and its inhabitants, gradually laying out a whole culture and jargon that's richly imagined. As you explore, your guide is the ever-present voice of the man inside the Transistor, offering a running commentary that sheds light on the threats at hand, the places you visit, and the character you control.”

It's also recognized that it's a combination of these things that continue to keep the player interested. Yannick LeJacq for Kotaku writes, “I could tell I was advancing through Transistor at a sluggish pace—seeking out every possible nook and cranny of its gorgeously opaque world to find more hints about what had happened to Red, the silent and mysterious protagonist.”

However, the scant delivery of the plot isn't something that went unnoticed, either, with Matt Miller rounding off his review with, “Players looking to find all the answers by the time the credits roll are likely to be disappointed. Transistor is as much about what is left unsaid as what is explained. I find that openness to interpretation refreshing; I suspect I won't be the only one.” In fact, he wasn't the only one. Danielle Riendeau for Polygon similarly ends off her review: “Ultimately, the worldbuilding and passive storytelling elements held more weight for me than the narrative itself – which ended on a note that was more “what just happened” than it was emotionally satisfying.”



LESSONS

- > Provide multiple ways for the player to discover more about the game world, within limitation. Important plot information shouldn't be hidden in something the player can miss. Alternate worldbuilding methods should be used to color the world. Transistor does this well with functions and OVC terminals.
- > In a story-centric game where you are intending the player to follow and understand the narrative, make sure your plot delivery is consistent and clear throughout the game. Transistor didn't do the best job at fleshing out the connection between its cutscenes and narration enough for readers to more easily put pieces together.
- > Connect worldbuilding or story to your core gameplay to make players more interested in the state of the world. Transistor did this by having its functions derived from other characters, unlocking more information about said character the more you use the function.

SUMMATION

Transistor treads a thin line between successfully telling the story it wants to in unconventional ways or falling flat and missing its mark on the player. Ultimately, it falls on the side of success, but just almost. Transistor deserves an analysis of its narrative design for the dual reasons of pointing out what it does to make not just a story interesting, but a world interesting, while also realizing where it almost fails in that execution. It's safe to say that Supergiant took risks with its narrative design in this title, which ultimately did pay off—to an extent.