

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Dead Space

Platform: Xbox 360, Playstation 3, PC

Genre: Survival Horror/3rd Person Shooter

Release Date: 10/13/08

Developer: Electronic Arts

Publisher: Electronic Arts

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Bret Robbins, Glen Schofield

Author of this review: Alexander Lifschitz

Overview

Dead Space is an original I.P. created and published by EA Games, chronicling the exploits of engineer Isaac Clarke aboard the USG Ishimura, a mining ship that has been overrun by a horrifying infection that reanimates the bodies of slain crew members, twisting them into grotesque amalgamations of flesh and bone (known as “necromorphs”). As part of an investigative crew aboard the USG Kellion, Isaac must figure out what exactly created the hell on earth (or space, hardy har har) that is the current state of the Ishimura while trying to stay alive. And, during all of this, he is burdened with the task of trying to rescue his girlfriend, Nicole, a medical specialist stationed on the ship.

As Isaac travels through the bowels of the ship, he plumbs the depths of the insanity that now runs amok on the decks of the Ishimura. The ship is now populated by rogue scientists that now see the transformation as an expression of divine will, audio logs from long-dead crew slowly realizing their fate, a dangerous and pervasive religion, and strange omens that cast doubt on his entire pursuit for Nicole. Isaac can upgrade his equipment and purchase new weapons and suits as he moves on, but increasingly aggressive and terrifying necromorphs continue to hound his every move as he gets closer to the truth.

Characters

For the purpose of expediency, we’ll analyze the characters most important to Isaac and the plot itself. There are a number of characters who, while they serve as the occasional MacGuffin, do not necessarily bear repeating for the purposes of the analysis.

- **Isaac Clarke** – The character controlled by the player for the entirety of the game. Isaac is an engineer, but his expertise in cutting tools and his resilient “RIG” (engineer suit) gives him the edge he needs to defend himself and dismember necromorphs (the only way to kill them). He is silent for the entirety

- of the game – the player only sees his face during the opening and ending. For the rest of the time, he wears a distinctive mask that gives off an eerie glow through a series of horizontal slits. An unlikely hero, he has a personal stake in the destruction of the Ishimura: His girlfriend, who serves as a medical officer on the ship and contacts him from time to time while he is on board. He carries a distress video from her at all times, and is seen watching it during the descent to the flight deck of the Ishimura at the start of the game.
- **Zach Hammond** – A soldier working for the Concordance Extraction Corporation (CEC), Hammond is a no-nonsense officer with a strict sense of duty and a hide tough enough to press on through the nightmare that is the Ishimura. At the start of the game, it appears that he simply wants to finish the job at all costs – to investigate the cause behind the events that have transpired on the Ishimura and report to the CEC. Eventually, though, the ship wears down on him, and he focuses on escaping with Isaac. Unfortunately, he is violently killed in the process, torn limb from limb in front of Isaac while they try to fix a shuttle to get away from the ship.
 - **Kendra Daniels** – The computer expert sent with Isaac and Hammond to investigate the Ishimura, she serves as your eyes and ears all over the ship during most of the game, moving from command center to command center, under constant attack from the necromorphs. She is often the one who identifies technological problems with the ship that Isaac needs to fix, and for the first half of the game, she tries to subtly influence Isaac by arousing suspicion of Hammond’s actions and motives. Eventually, though, she is revealed to be a double agent, working for the government and using Isaac for her own needs. She, too, is violently ripped apart during the final stretch of the game.
 - **Nicole Brennan** – Isaac’s girlfriend, and a medical officer aboard the Ishimura. She sends an SOS to Isaac about the situation aboard the ship, and Isaac encounters her frequently during his travels, but never in a situation that warrants a continuous presence. She helps Isaac by running computer systems and giving access to personnel areas, but the player frequently receives chilling, ominous messages from her about “making us whole again.” It is eventually revealed that she actually killed herself at the end of the SOS video, and the Nicole you encounter on the ship is actually a manifestation of the Marker, using Isaac for its own purposes.
 - **The Marker** – Although not a human character, the Marker deserves a place in the character roster. It was discovered on earth – a seemingly alien artifact that was reverse-engineered by the government, and a copy was manufactured and put on the Aegis VII for observation – the very planet that the Ishimura was set to crack, in order to harvest ore. The colony on Aegis VII suffered the same fate as the Ishimura, before the Marker was brought on board and caused the ship to delve into the chaos that resulted in the distress beacon being activated. The necromorphs seem to be controlled by a “hive mind” on the planet, which is in

turn controlled by the Marker – removing it caused the suppression to stop and the necromorphs to begin wreaking havoc. It is revealed to be sentient, even going so far as to make an impersonation of Nicole to get Isaac to return it to the planet.

Breakdown

I'm going to illustrate a point here by summarizing the entirety of the plot, turns/settings and all, as briefly as I possibly can. Isaac, Kendra, and Hammond arrive on the Ishimura from the Kellion. They encounter their first necromorph, and their ship ka-splodes. They look for a way to send out a distress beacon, and along the way, they uncover little nuggets about the history of the Marker and the downfall of the Ishimura, fight off the crazed doctor Challus Mercer, and generally try not to die while Isaac fixes things. When they set off the beacon, they realize that the ship that has received the SOS, the USM Valor, has already intercepted a jettisoned escape pod containing a necromorph – the entirety of the Valor crew has been killed, and the Valor crashes into the Ishimura. Isaac and Hammond board the Valor to get a module to power an escape craft, Hammond gets killed, and Isaac encounters Dr. Kyne, who wants him to bring the marker to Aegis VII. They prep the marker for transport, Kyne is killed when Kendra betrays Isaac, and Isaac and Nicole get the marker back and bring it to the planet. Kendra reveals that Nicole has been dead all along, Kendra gets killed, Isaac defeats the hivemind, and finally takes off in a spaceship. Cue moment of introspection, and a necromorph'd Nicole attacks Isaac. Credits roll.

You see how much I had to write about there? Dead Space's curse is how impeccable the plot actually is. The dialogue is brilliant, the setting is original, the twists are not entirely expected (such as the infection of the Valor), and there's plenty of white space in there for action and liberty with artistic direction. But for some reason, it was decided by the powers that be that Isaac, as an engineer, should spend all his time fixing broken crap. Part of the allure of a good narrative is a delicate use of the carrot and stick, but Dead Space made a particularly succulent carrot, and then ties that to a god damn fighter jet. We spend the first three fourths of the game as Hammond and Kendra's errand boy/repairman, and the game can't seem to throw enough obstacles in your way.

Imagine you get up in the morning, and you decide to put on your pants. But you can't put them on – there's a massive rip, and it's your only pair. You go to get the sewing kit – but it's in a closet that, for some godforsaken reason, you've decided to secure with 3 separate keys. You go to find the keys – the first key, as you just now remember, is behind a wall of old boxes you still have from when you moved in. You get prepared to move them – and then you realize that your fingers have gone gangrenous and fallen off in your sleep. After a while, you just want to break down and die. "I just want to put my pants on!"

When you finally fix your pants, you put on your shirt. And then you realize that it's on fire.

This is basically what Dead Space does to you ad nauseum.

Of course, you could say that these are just avenues to discover the background and scope of the destruction inflicted by the necromorphs – by following in their footsteps and repairing the damage. That’s understandable, but the execution, I believe, is flawed. It is *effective*, no doubt, but there is a problem with both the idea of using this kind of arbitrary extension of gameplay through narrative, as well as the frequency with which it is utilized. There simply must be some less infuriating way than to stymie Isaac with technical mishaps that only go awry the second he fixes the previous one. I have played games before that made me nearly chuck my console out of the window, but never before has this desire been spurred by the narrative. I say this because the underlying game mechanics are as solid as a rock, but when your overarching goal is beset on all sides by fix-it jobs, the fruits of your labor seem to hang ever out of reach.

Again, the reason this irritates as much as it does is because of how *impressive* the narrative is without the infuriating pacing. Characters such as Kendra and Hammond are compelling and multifaceted – so much so that Kendra’s eventual betrayal comes as a genuine shock. Characters, such as a Nemesis-esque invincible creature who follows you from room to room, are introduced and used at key points in the game to heighten tension, as opposed to many of the cheap shocks that some accuse the game of trying to pass off as horror. Twists like the infection of the Valor are not only unique and unprecedented, but, given the established atmosphere of the loss of sanity and hope, they are effective as narrative devices. Seeing the one thing you’ve been working towards be destroyed by that which you’ve been working *against*, especially when you’ve been used as a pawn for it all, strikes just the right chord (or the *intended* chord) with players. The gameplay itself is reflective of the narrative, actually. Standard horror fare like Doom would have you mindlessly blasting enemies, with no further objective than ‘get to point B’, making the plot ancillary at best. Dead Space actually has you trying to strategically dismember your enemies to fight that which makes them what they are – their resilience and regenerative powers. It’s frightening enough to have such a grotesque set of adversaries, but it’s even worse when you suddenly have to flush away the standard shooter reliance on the headshot.

Strongest Element

If one thing could be said about the strongest element of the Dead Space narrative, it would be something I already stated above: It’s a hard safe to crack, but the loot is priceless. The way the narrative is constructed goads the player along so beautifully that the payoff makes all the incessant errand-boy bullsh*t they toss your way worth it. The progression/reward mechanic may be busted in the overarching narrative, but the bits and pieces you pick up as you fight through the ship are just juicy enough to sate you in the immediate. From the outset of the game, you have questions – what are these monsters? How did they get here? What is this ‘Unitology’ business, and why did it matter? How do we get off this ship? Best of all, the game not only poses the questions, but *answers* them. Unlike many games that have been bit by the ‘Part of an Epic Trilogy’ virus, it answers all the most pressing questions of the game, almost in the same sequence as they are asked. This practice on the part of the developers leaves you with an unmistakable feeling

of closure by the game's end, even though a select few pressing issues are left unsolved. You feel that every part you've played had a role in the story (arbitrary or not), and there's just enough wiggle room for a (very welcome) sequel if need be.

Unsuccessful Element

For all the work EA put into making Dead Space an atmospheric and engrossing game, character endearment is nil. To be fair, it does realistically portray the shortcomings, capabilities, and deaths of characters. However, for all the realistic character development, there are some key elements of character endearment that the narrative sorely lacked.

Case in point: Isaac himself. They tried to make him human, give him connections to the cast and crew, tied him down with an emotional anchor in Nicole, etc. But in the end, it doesn't pack the same punch as it rightfully should. This doesn't have anything to do with the fact that Isaac never speaks a word throughout the game – remember a little game called Chrono Trigger on the SNES? The main character was mute, and by the end of the game, the emotional connection between him and the player was profound, to say the least (especially when he is temporarily killed off, but more on that technique later). By forging no lasting relationships and being presented as a conduit for the other characters to do their dirty work, Isaac becomes exactly what the developers intended, but in the wrong way. He is empty, but the player cannot fill that void with their own interpretations of the character. It doesn't help either when, upon learning of Nicole's death, Isaac reacts with all the emotional anguish as if he'd just found a fresh pigeon turd on his Lamborghini.

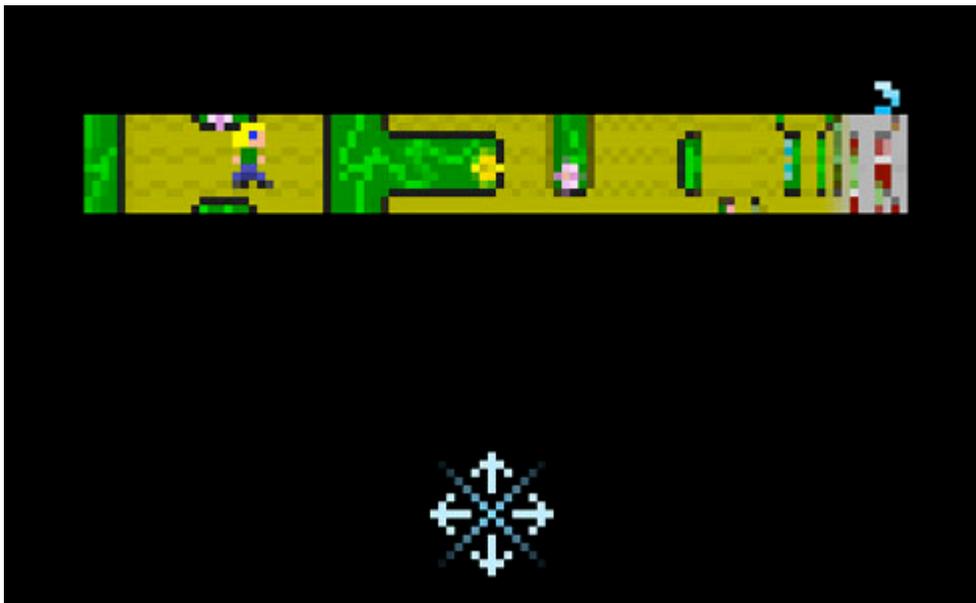
Nicole's death is another great example of how to botch character endearment. They tried. They really, really tried to get us to care about Nicole. But the setup made the revelation a yawner, and a predictable one at that. It's the BioShock issue. From the get go, what with her creepy messages, we know something is wrong with Nicole! But what can we do? She is our Atlas, forcing us to move on with no choice and continue an arbitrary narrative thread, even though we know clearly that something is amiss! There is no better way to instill hatred in a non-playable character. It especially breeds frustration given the two-steps-forwards, one-step-back style of the pacing.

Dead Space is a game many accuse for using shock horror, but it also tries to use “shock narrative.” Shock narrative, to be brief, is the easy way out. You put something in a story to develop characters without paying attention to the way you're doing it, as if you have a checklist for character endearment that only needs to be satisfied in the most basic of ways. Is Nicole supposed to be emotionally valuable to the player? Fine - skip the growth and endearment, and just call her your girlfriend. It works, right? Check! Maybe throw in one or two situations where she does something for you, no matter how arbitrary. That makes her an asset, right? We can check that off, too! The developers seemed to have it in their heads that none of us would be suspicious, or see a twist, and they thusly had our own expectations baked into their structure. She dies! It's shocking! We did everything on the checklist, why wouldn't it be?

Now, that's one thing – but they passed up a great way to make us care about characters, which is to make them *useful*. Unlike shock narrative, the concept of “emotional utility” is something that was left *out* of the narrative considerations. Nobody cares if someone we didn't know and didn't serve us much good kicks the bucket. Nicole's usefulness, an endearing quality, is made apparent in only arbitrary scenarios. When Nicole died, the only consequence that was made apparent to me was that I no longer would run into mechanical malfunctions only she could fix. Why would I not celebrate? And even if Nicole WAS useful, it is revealed to us that the Nicole who helped us throughout the game was an apparition created by the Marker. If she died over the course of the game (as opposed to before the game began), as a player who only knows from basic character utility, I would be more sympathetic towards the Marker than I was towards Nicole!

Examine a game like Final Fantasy VII, as tired as that comparison may be. In FF7, we grow with Aerith, we learn to love her. She's a partner, and a damn useful member of your party all through your time with her. In Dead Space, we are simply told: You are in love with this woman. All she does is lend a helping hand in preconceived, static scenarios (as opposed to dynamic assistance), leave creepy messages, and act as less-than-alluring bait.

Or take the indie game *Passage*, for example. *Passage* is a simple game in which a player must navigate an environment to collect treasure until he dies of old age. As time progresses, the character's “center” in the screen is moved slowly to the right, to express the passage of time. The most important trait of the game, though, that you can meet a female character and take her with you on your travels. While she is with you, the treasure you collect is more valuable, but because you always have her at your side, certain passages become too narrow to fit through.



Passage: Not as pretty as Dead Space.

But the point of all this is what happens towards the end of a playthrough: She dies, and remains where she died as a gravestone. The “relationship” you forge with this tiny, iconic collection of pixels becomes so involving that her death hits harder than it would in almost any other game on the market. I have known people who played this game and literally stood by her grave until they, too, expired, for the sole purpose of being able to die next to her. *Passage* is able to illustrate this concept of emotional utility with the beauty that only a few kilobytes of file size can offer. You feel a genuine attachment to your counterpart, her usefulness is tangible, and her death is the crux of the game. How is it that this game can succeed where a triple-A titles like *Dead Space* fall flat on their face?

I was honestly more shocked at the deaths of the rest of your party, but only to a point. You had no clue if something was going wrong - for Hammond, it just happens out of nowhere. Perfect! That's to be expected in this kind of environment, right? But there was still an emotional duality to it all. On the one hand, I really didn't care. What did he ever do for me but bark orders at me to fix parts of the ship? Parts that were, interestingly enough, only in the creepiest bowels of the Ishimura? But at the same time, when he died, I realized that he did actually provide me with something - companionship. Silly as it may be, in a game like *Dead Space*, having that voice of reason occasionally pop up on your frequency, for whatever reason, was reassuring. Though the game presented the backdrop as one of isolation (again, shock narrative - it isn't squad-based, so you're alone, right?!), you knew that there was still another human somewhere on the ship. When he got killed, that was the end of the normalcy. You were left with a psychotic doctor, a traitor, and a girlfriend who as very clearly nothing of the sort. We can see that something is clearly wrong with Nicole, and her presence only provides a sense of foreboding, not companionship.

Also, plot hole: Are we supposed to expect that Isaac loved Nicole so much that he never watched her video the whole way through and saw her suicide?

Highlight

When you're trying to meet Hammond in a control room, and you eventually leave, you enter a room with escape pods. Out of nowhere, a necromorph pops out of one and tries to eat your face. Before you have the chance to aim, Hammond locks up the pod with the Necromorph still inside, and ejects it from the ship. A scary moment, yes, but not entirely staggering.

Until, that is, you make contact with the *Valor*, your sole hope of rescue from the Ishimura. After finally fixing the ship's receiver to see if the *Valor* got your SOS, you instead get an altogether more alarming message (though I'm paraphrasing):

“This is the *Valor*. We are enroute to your position. We have intercepted your escape pod, and we are coming to evacuate survivors.”

Whew! Thank god. They're going to...

... Wait...

... Did they just say they accepted our escape pod?

Oh no.

Oh HELL no.

You know that uneasy feeling, that knot in your stomach when you realize something has gone horribly, horribly wrong? Yeah. That's what you feel when you get that message. That seemingly inconsequential necromorph you dealt with is coming back to bite you in the ass.

Of course, Kendra shares your sentiments when she figures out what that means, and broadcasts to the Valor an urgent message to not open the escape pod. And, of course, they did. The next message you get is a feed of a necromorph killing members of the Valor crew, and before long, the ship slams into the Ishimura, now devoid of life and teeming with enhanced monsters. This is the same technique that was used so brilliantly in the original Halo, when you discovered that the weapon cache that Captain Keyes was going after was actually a safe to house the flood; that same panic in Cortana's voice when she first learns the truth was manifest in your own psyche when you figured out that you had just inadvertently doomed the Valor.

Critical Reception

Dead Space was a critical darling, garnering a slew of awards and earning a roughly 9/10 average score across multiple sites and magazines – but the weak point, as expected, was primarily extruded from the narrative and the character development, particularly the lack thereof. Conrad Zimmerman of Destructoid noted that “Nobody is ever really developed” and “Sadly, we're never really given a reason why we should care about [the characters]. They lack personality, for the most part, making the history as cold and inhuman as the present. The characters we do get to know are largely two-dimensional and not very interesting.” Particularly, he says the same thing about Isaac's unrealized potential as described above: “The most tragic example of unrealized potential lies in Isaac himself. We know next to nothing about him and that changes very little through the course of the game. The opening cinematic features a great hook regarding the relationship between Isaac and Nicole, one which is teased many times in the course of the game. Then, after being strung along with it for so long, the payoff winds up disappointing.” He did, however, give the game an overall score of 9/10 on its other merits: “It may not have the most gripping story but it positively shines from a gameplay perspective.”

Jeff Haynes, with his review on IGN, has a far more positive evaluation of the narrative: “Not only does the game lay down the foundation of why things went wrong on the Ishimura, it sets up the game to be the launching point for a franchise, and the universe of Dead Space is definitely large enough to support a vast series after this title.” This addresses the fact that the narrative of the game is indeed a selling point, though the

review does not address the flaws of that very element. He ended up giving the game an 8.7/10 overall for the same reasons as Zimmerman.

However, in the Destructoid joint review with Zimmerman, reviewer Dale North turned out to be the only other journalist I could find that addresses the critical flaw with pacing and rewards, as seen in the following paragraph:

“*Dead Space* falls short when it comes to story and characters. Without revealing too much, we'll say that you're constantly working to get out of a crisis on the USG Ishimura. This has you constantly running item quests. Granted, item quests are not uncommon for survival horror titles, but *Dead Space* does a poor job of attaching a story to the journey for, say... the key card. Or DNA sample. Or energy pack. They just seem like meaningless items you have to find to proceed. The characters are few and far between in *Dead Space*, but you never feel an attachment to them. In the end, they're equally as disposable as the baddies you kill on the ship. And, as Conrad said, even Isaac himself doesn't have much going on in the way of a story line. In the end, I fear that you'll be slightly disappointed by how the story wraps up.”

That, my friends, pretty nicely sums up my grievances with the narrative. North gave the game a 9/10, in the same fashion and for the same reasons as Zimmerman. The narrative issues are but a small fish in the *Dead Space* pond, and the rest are so tantalizing that you can't help but keep fishing.

Lessons

So, what can we learn from the example of *Dead Space*? Here are just a few key lessons:

- If you're going to write an enticing plot, don't anger the player by waving it just out of arm's reach. Feed it to them, let them enjoy the fruits of your labor in a manner that is deserving of a hungry litterateur trying to get to the next chapter of a great book. You don't publish a book like *The Da Vinci Code* and make every other chapter about how to make banana daiquiris. Thusly, you don't make a game with an excellent narrative arc and make every level about fixing the most recent broken ship resource without feeding the player with bits of reward in terms of narrative or accomplishments. You wrote it. Revel in it.
- Endearing characters to the player is more than just hitting them in the face with a brick that has “you love this woman” scrawled on the front in sharpie. Make your characters useful, whether it's a psychological crutch or an abstract function that helps you with reoccurring, dynamic situations. Make sure your protagonist makes more of a difference than a repairman. Help people. Make the player care about the characters by making the characters care about the player.
- Not everything is black and white. Games are an art form, and art is abstract. If you've followed a checklist, you're scraping by with the bare minimum. Go the extra mile with the way you present your game. This is what made the atmosphere so engrossing, but the characters anything but.
- Helplessness is a wire act in the field of game design. Make your protagonist too helpless, and the player will wonder why he's bothering playing the game. But

letting them try to alter a helpless situation can result in moments like those described in the highlight section; making the player *believe* that they can still make a difference for events that are already in motion is an excellent way to drive the player and create those “Oh, sh*t” moments.

Summation

I would apologize if the narrative review at any point suggested that Dead Space was a game not deserving of the massive amounts of critical praise it received. The design of a game of this magnitude and scope is always going to have some flaws, and unfortunately, it was the narrative and pacing that drew the short straw this time around. It can be excused, given how incredibly well-executed the rest of the game happened to be, but these elements are absolutely critical in a game like this. Survival horror is a well-worn road to travel, but if you miss the emotional involvement, you’re missing the point. A game without rewarding progression and emotional involvement is a game with no soul, and while the overarching game experience comes off as a net positive, the faults we find are often the things we most sorely miss.