

Game Narrative Review

Game Title: World of Goo

Platform: PC

Genre: Puzzle

Release Date: October 13, 2008

Developer: 2D Boy

Publisher: 2D Boy

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Kyle Gabler; Ron Carmel

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Overview

World of Goo is about the exploits (and exploitation) of a group of lovable sentient goo balls. The goo balls have been awakened by pipes leading to an unknown destination. Driven by curiosity, the goo balls build themselves into towers, reaching towards the pipe so that some may explore where it leads. The pipes are run by World of Goo Corporation which uses the goo balls in its products. As goo balls from all over the land journey towards the pipes, World of Goo Corporation grows more powerful and continues to expand.

The story is presented to the player in a very factual manner. The only character commenting on what is happening is the mysterious and self-absorbed Sign Painter. Many of the signs appear to start out as a game play hint or social commentary, but immediately become about the Sign Painter, leaving the player to fill in the blanks with their own ideas. The beauty in World of Goo's story is that it doesn't tell the player what to think. It presents interesting moral scenarios such as vanity, corporate greed, pollution, and even spam mail using symbolism present in various puzzles, but does so from a naïve perspective that is primarily concerned about game play. This allows players to generate their own opinions or simply enjoy the game for its puzzles.

Characters

- **World of Goo Corporation** – A large corporation that harvests goo balls to be used and sold in various products. World of Goo Corporation focuses primarily on progress and expansion and spans many islands with intricate pipe systems designed to collect goo.
- **The Sign Painter** – The only character with “dialog,” the Sign Painter leaves signs scattered throughout the world expressing his opinion as well as providing tips to the player. The Sign Painter is a little on the self-absorbed side, but usually views things from a practical viewpoint.
- **Goo balls** – The goo balls have a strange relationship with the player. The player controls the actions of the goo balls and builds them towards World of Goo Corporation's pipes. It's pretty obvious the player does this in order to win the game, but the actions of the goo balls in the context of the game world are actually rather mysterious. The Sign Painter projects personality onto the goo balls by assigning traits based on their various abilities. For example, the green ball's ability to detach could mean it has “commitment anxiety.” Couple the Sign Painter's commentary with the fact that teamwork and self-sacrifice are common occurrences in every level and the player has a lot of material to characterize these little balls of goo. The goo balls are the player, and any attempt to rationalize the goo balls' motives must be done by the player because the player is the only one making them do anything.

Breakdown

World of Goo has a very clear beginning, middle, and end like any good story. It's utilization of the player as a source of conflict and character motive is what sets it apart from other games, and stories in general. The player isn't just forced to observe injustice, but to actively participate in it for success. Because there is only one way to finish the game, it forces players to take actions they maybe otherwise wouldn't in order to get new perspective on the issue, as well as creating internal conflict that

can only be overcome on a personal level. This gives a unique, reluctant perspective that creates a more personal reaction to the story. By using interactivity to enhance player emotion and engagement, World of Goo is forging the way to true interactive storytelling.

The story begins as little more than a game. The Sign Painter provides hints and humorous observations regarding how the game is played, and World of Goo Corporation is the entity that awards the player with completion at each level. The story doesn't really start until the end of Chapter 1 where a group of goo balls float high in the sky and see distant lands filled with opportunity. Chapter 2 begins on an island filled with rumors of a mysterious power plant. On the way to the factory, a new type of goo is discovered. Giant "beauty" balls that must be ground up in order to be sucked through an exclusive pipe system. These new beauty balls are so important that standard goo balls must be sacrificed to pave the way to exclusive pipes. In one instance, a mechanical Red Carpet Extend-o-Matic must be lowered for a beauty ball to roll across. To activate the mechanism, a large tower of goo must be built atop a button to press it. The Red Carpet Extend-o-Matic is lowered and its spiked bottom crushes and destroys the goo balls that created the tower so the beauty ball could cross. This symbolic representation of vanity obsession is one of the first instances where the steps necessary to complete a level require the player to perform morally questionable symbolic actions to win. Another example is inside a sorting machine where the ugly balls must be separated from the beautiful ones. The ugly balls are ground up and thrown into a pit so the beauty ball can cross by stepping over the crushed remains. The sorting machine leads to a giant woman who used to power the world with her beauty. The ground up beauty balls are injected into her forehead and allow her to produce electricity once again.

The new power source allows World of Goo Corporation to expand and outsource throughout the world. Chapter 3 takes place on an island filled with abandoned factories left by World of Goo Corporation. These factories have already served their purpose preparing for the release of Product Z, and any pollution or waste created are just steps on the way to progress. In fact, progress through destruction is a recurring theme in this Chapter. Many levels require the player to destroy to finish, and

even the Sign Painter seems unfazed by this behavior. “[...] But the pipe is right behind his head. Well... you can't stop progress.” After blasting through the derelict buildings, the player begins the unveiling of Product Z. The inciting incident begins as Product Z transforms the world into three dimensions, and renders the goo balls incompatible with the world. The goo balls are sent to the Information Super Highway as bits of data and are trapped as long as World of Goo Corporation still stands. While exploring the vast emptiness of the internet, it becomes apparent that privacy is not a concern. A handful of goo balls are being used as data in a chat client, and must be intercepted to complete the level. The Sign Painter points out that this can be achieved by using a monitoring system used to catch bandits on the Information Super Highway. “But it was hard to know who's a bandit and who's not. It's probably best to monitor everyone just to be safe.” The most serious infraction of privacy is committed by MOM, a search client who consistently sells user information to companies so they can be sent spam mail. After a brief discussion with MOM, it is learned that somewhere on the Information Super Highway is all of the spam mail ever sent in the history of the internet. If all of that mail was sent to World of Goo Corporation at once, it might be enough to overload the system and break free from the bonds of Product Z. In order to do this, multiple security systems must be broken and overridden. While there have been instances where the player must do things that can be viewed as morally wrong, breaking through the security systems is the first time the Sign Painter doesn't passively encourage and explicitly states, “You're not supposed to be down here.” Whether or not to undelete all that mail is the biggest quandary in the game, but it is clear the player has already made the decision by breaking down security to get there. To drive home the point that there is no going back, the dialog box that asks if the player is sure only has the two options of “ok” and “yes.” The influx in spam mail is so great, it actually causes World of Goo Corporation to explode and releases the world from the grasp of Product Z.

The story then explores the aftermath of this destruction. World of Goo Corporation is in shambles, and dust from the explosion blocks out the sky. A few more groups of goo balls are still

gathered on small islands, and must work to reach the last few pipes. The Sign Painter becomes increasingly depressed and pessimistic, encouraging the player to simply give up and quit. It is then discovered that the Sign Painter is actually the Telescope Operator, and is depressed because the dust prevents him from gazing into the sky. Balloon-like fish can be attached to the telescope and carry it up through the clouds to allow it to see over all the land. All of the trials passed by the goo balls are shown as they gather into a huge tower at World of Goo Corporation's destroyed Headquarters. Before the telescope can see what the tower is building towards, a goo ball blocks the view and the telescope descends back beneath the clouds.

World of Goo has a story to tell. Not a story to be read or heard, but a story to be played. By using interactive elements to progress the story, players are given a stake in the game world. The game world is strategically crafted to force an emotional dilemma on the player. Regardless of the player's stance on a particular issue, there is only one path to success. If the player wishes to win, some personal values may have to be put aside and some goo balls symbolically sacrificed. It's easy to point out flaws or poor values in characters when passively watching a story progress, but things change when the audience is forced to make the same decisions. This level of interaction enriches immersion by communicating with the player on a personal level. World of Goo is a shining example of interactive storytelling and an indicator of great game experiences yet to come.

Strongest Element

By far the best part of the game's storyline is the manner in which it is presented. There is definitely a story, but it isn't forced on the player. Most of the storytelling happens by viewing the level itself or reading the various signs written by the Sign Painter. Even the signs are frequently stylized tutorials that serve the dual purpose of telling a story and guiding the player through the game. For example, the third chapter takes place on an island filled with abandoned factories. The Sign Painter alludes to a new product launch from World of Goo Corporation by observing a nearby garbage dump.

“Judging by the buildup, we must be getting close to the launch of the new Product.” He then provides the observation that the cliffs have become sticky which is useful knowledge for completing the level.

The game presents itself in such a subtle manner that the simple act of following the story is fun because it feels like a discovery. The Sign Painter never tells the player what to think, but rather hints at an issue and allows the player to come up with a solution. This immerses the player into the story because certain aspects such as the goo balls motives are left up to interpretation. Because the player is actually controlling the goo balls, they technically have the same motive, so the player is projected into the story and must contextualize his actions to fit into the game world.

Unsuccessful Element

The one element that I think could have been portrayed better was the Information Super Highway. It seems to be implied that everyone is sent there upon the release of Product Z, but when you arrive, it had already been abandoned years ago. There isn't mention of where everybody went or why or how. I would like some information on the condition of the 3D world during the time the goo balls are stuck in the incompatible 2D internet.

Highlight

The point in the game that impressed me most was The Red Carpet level in which a tower of goo is crushed by a spiked red carpet so a beautiful goo ball could walk over it. I hadn't considered World of Goo to be anything more than a quirky puzzle game until I played that level. The imagery was striking enough to make me really give the game's potential for powerful storytelling a second look.

The game leverages the player's goal for completion in such a way to force callous sacrifice for the sake of an arbitrary victory. This puts players into a situation where they cannot pass judgement on the act because they themselves are wholly responsible. The goal driven nature of games can often

dilute attempts at powerful narrative, but World of Goo shows that uniting the win condition of game play with the message creates a much more profound reaction in the player than either element could alone.

Critical Reception

The reviews of the game's story are usually very brief. There are so many fantastic elements in World of Goo, the story is glossed over in favor of praising the unique game play, beautiful art, and wonderful soundtrack. IGN's Matt Casamassina gave it a 9.5 out of 10 and mentioned the Sign Painter as the primary guide to the world and story, but doesn't site many examples for fear of spoiling anything for the reader. Sal 'Sluggo' Accardo at GameSpy gave a full 5-star rating, yet the only mentions the narrative as “[...] a wry little story that takes subtle jabs at everything from beauty to consumerism to Internet privacy.”

Most people play games for the game play, so the reviewers naturally focus on that point. The game is also, simply put, very well done. It's easy to overlook the story when the game is so great. In addition, part of the strength in World of Goo's story is its subtlety. The game doesn't beat the player over the head with the story, which makes it hard to notice, but only adds to the appeal.

Lessons

World of Goo has a lot of great lessons to teach about subtlety in interactive storytelling. Using game play to enhance the story instead of dialog or cut-scenes will have a much greater impact on the player in addition to helping the medium grow as a whole.

- Game play is part of the experience. Let each level tell its own story.
- Important issues can be addressed without cramming it down the player's throat. By presenting the topic in a subtle manner, it won't sound preachy or turn the player off.
- Develop a connection to the topic at hand and the player. Players will be much more likely to

reflect on an issue if they have first hand experience with it through game play.

Summation

World of Goo may not be the first game that comes to mind when narrative is mentioned, but I believe it is currently the best example of storytelling available in the medium of games. Games are meant to be played and stories are meant to be told. Understanding how a story can be played is the most important lesson for the game industry to learn, and World of Goo is only a step on the way to creating truly amazing experiences that can only be consumed as games.