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Game Title: Little Inferno
Platform: Wii U, PC, iPad
Genre: Puzzle/Sandbox
Release Date: November 18, 2012
Developer: Tomorrow Corporation
Publisher: Tomorrow Corporation
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Kyle Gabler et al.

Overview

Little Inferno is a deconstruction of the puzzle game genre, developed by the Tomorrow Corporation, made up of members of 2D Boy (*World of Goo*) and EA Tiburon (*Henry Hatsworth*). In *Little Inferno*, the player is seated in front of the titular fireplace in the protagonist's living room and instructed to burn, purchase, and continue burning nearly everything he can get his hands on. The player is also informed that the constant burning of items is necessary – in the outside world of the game, snow falls constantly due to the city's smoke blocking out the sun, and people use the fireplaces to avoid freezing.

Characters

- The Protagonist – The player character. Since this is largely a first-person game, the protagonist does not speak, but merely responds to the other characters' interactions, either through the burning of items in the fireplace or through mail correspondence.
- Miss Nancy – An eccentric billionaire, the chubby woman known only as Miss Nancy is the owner and CEO of the Tomorrow Corporation, producers of the Little Inferno Entertainment Fireplace. She wears a floral-print dress and a beehive hairdo, and is extremely affectionate towards other characters, acting as a grandmother or aunt figure. She's prone to bursts of laughter or shouting “Whee” which somehow get transcribed into the letters you read from her. She seems to be obsessed with hugging.
- The Weather Man – The Weather Man is a dapper, bespectacled gentleman who flies above the city in a hot air balloon, delivering weather updates via the postage system. Throughout much of the game (at points defined by the player's progress), he delivers breaking bulletins about the constant snowstorm, mostly to inform the player that it is, in fact, still snowing outside.
- Sugar Plumps – A young, happy-go-lucky girl whose letters are rife with typographical errors, Sugar Plumps is eventually revealed to be the protagonist's next-door neighbor. Various gifts are traded between her and the protagonist through the mail, and she reveals bits of information to him about the game and

the nature of the Little Inferno Entertainment Fireplaces. She is much more intelligent than she first appears.

Breakdown

At the beginning of *Little Inferno*, you find yourself seated in front of a large brick fireplace with only some paper and the instruction to start a fire. As you burn things in the fireplace, you begin to receive mail – which you can read and then burn in the fireplace. Each item has its own effect or gimmick upon burning, and you can prod at the fireplace and have a great deal of fun with the physics. Burning objects yields coins, which can then be spent via mail-order catalog (complete with cheery shopping-mall music). The items you buy are shipped to you after a short amount of time, which can be sped up with the use of stamps. Stamps are obtained by igniting certain combinations of items at the same time. These combinations are listed in the game's menu, with a name which alludes to the combo's ingredients (for instance, the Springtime Combo is found by burning a packet of flower seeds with an alarm clock).

Every time an item is burned, its ashes produce a number of coins higher than that item's original cost. In this way, a profit is generated, which allows you to purchase more items, unlock catalogs from which to order, or expand the space in your mailbox, allowing you to receive more packages. Each aspect of the game feeds into this idea of consumption and profit, as well as showcasing a sort of willful ignorance on the part of the non-player characters. During the game you can watch an advertisement for the fireplace, with a catchy jingle urging children to burn up their toys to keep warm. The narrator informs the children that “it's been snowing for years, and we just don't know why.” During this explanation, the camera follows the smoke from the chimney up to the snowstorm above the city. The game strongly implies that this cycle of consumption and pollution is the cause of the unnatural freezing weather, but the narrator assures that “there's no cause for alarm,” allowing the commercial to take a grim turn as the children are burned alive with their toys and home.

As you complete each catalog by burning all of the items in it, letters come in from the primary characters. Miss Nancy, the jolly, rotund owner of the Tomorrow Corporation, gives you advice on the game and its features. The Tomorrow Corporation, whose logo is that of a sun on the horizon, is responsible for most of the events in the game – a point is made that the sun could either be rising or setting. The Weather Man informs you of conditions outside. These mail updates are crucial – the camera is fixed in front of the fireplace, and thus the Weather Man is your only informant on conditions outside the context of the Little Inferno. Every item in the game, every letter is dripping with meaning and metaphor, and the player then makes the choice to burn all of these things for the sake of progress, the pursuit of novelty, or perhaps just to waste time.

Last but certainly not least is Sugar Plumps, an overly friendly girl who is the protagonist's neighbor. You trade packages with her and she gives you small gifts as well as some insight into the Little Inferno. Over the course of the story she talks to you numerous times, and towards the latter half of the game her messages become increasingly cryptic. The typos characteristic of her letters begin to diminish as she provides a startling amount of information; however, this is cut abruptly short as her own Little Inferno explodes violently, setting her house ablaze. The player is forced to sit and

accept this – there is no way for you to move from in front of your fireplace as the ashes from her home fall down your chimney.

Finally, as the last catalog is purchased, you begin receiving letters from a new source – the photo attached is mostly blacked out. This character supersedes Sugar Plumps' role as informant and makes comments on the futility of the player's actions. After some correspondence with all of the characters, and purchase of every object in the game, it is disclosed that there is a certain combination of items which cause the Little Inferno to malfunction and explode. At the same time, the shadowy informant reveals herself as Sugar Plumps, who survived the explosion in her home caused by burning these items. She insists that you do the same, and upon doing so, the player's own Little Inferno malfunctions violently; it even destroys the game's user interface as it erupts into flames and the explosion blasts the protagonist's home apart.

The protagonist, seen here for the first time, gets up from the ruins of his house and begins walking through the snow-covered city. He meets the mailman, another unseen character who has been delivering each package unnoticed throughout the course of the game. From him, you receive a final letter from Sugar Plumps wishing you luck in your newfound freedom. As you continue exploring the city, you come to the front gates of the ubiquitous Tomorrow Corporation. After a brief but humorous interaction with both the gatekeeper and the receptionist, you ascend the building and finally come face-to-face with Miss Nancy. She remains as confusing as ever, helping wrap up the denouement by providing vague background information about her company and the city, then subsequently climbing into a rocket bound for outer space. The protagonist then wordlessly leaves the Corporation and heads out of town, where he meets the Weather Man on a windy cliffside. The game concludes when the player chooses to enter his hot air balloon and escape the city for the unknown wilderness.

Strongest Element

The best feature of this game is the focus on the narrative – it is representative of a recent trend of game designers to bring the story to the forefront. The gameplay mechanics that exist in the game work entirely as metaphors to reinforce the themes of the narrative and support the main story. Every possible action in the game leads, either directly or indirectly, to the purchase and conflagration of items, and the limited gameplay design allows for a purposeful frustration and reflection on the futility of the player's actions. The writing itself is also stellar – with judicious use of repetition to allow the circular mindset of the game sinking in. A player will easily find him/herself thinking about these crucial phrases long after the game is over.

Unsuccessful Element

The game, while clever – brilliant, even – is hardly without flaw. A few of the puzzles can be a bit obtuse (for instance, finding the two items which both include a specific word in their catalog description). In addition, a common complaint of reviewers which I echo is that the game is quite short. It's easily finished within the span of 5 hours, and while those hours are thoughtful and entertaining, and a few hidden secrets offer some enticement and play, there isn't much incentive to replay the game after its conclusion.

Highlight

The death of Sugar Plumps is by far the most compelling moment in the game. It uses the mechanics set forth in the game against the player – at a crucial moment when you actually desire something outside the framework of the game, the limitations become incredibly apparent. The use of the fixed camera to take control away from the player is a brilliant maneuver, and the futility of that moment pounds the message of the game home like no other part of the story. You are forced to hear the chaos ensue as chunks of her burning home fall down your own chimney, and I would call this moment one of the more powerful uses of the cutscene as a narrative device in recent years.

Critical Reception

Little Inferno received mixed-to-positive reviews, averaging out at about a 70 out of 100 points on the aggregate site Metacritic. Much praise was given to the fun simplicity of the game, its writing and story, and visual effects. Common criticisms pointed out the shortness of the game, the sometimes tedious gameplay, and frustrations experienced by the reviewer.

IGN's Anthony Gallegos gave it a 5 out of 10, saying the constraining gameplay bored him and that the puzzles were uninspired. He praised the art direction and the detail given to the various objects, but overall disliked the vagueness of the story and themes of the game.

A review on Kotaku by Stephen Totilo urged players to play the game, saying it offered a compelling emotional experience. He went on to describe the juxtaposition between its simple, often mindless gameplay with the thoughtful characters and story, calling it “one of [his] favourite games on Nintendo's new console.”

Finally, Christian Donlan of Eurogamer gives the game a glowing review, an 8 out of 10, with emphasis on the satirical nature of the game and calls the narrative “dark, suggestive, and wonderfully spooky.”

Lessons

1. A strong story is always good, but in a game, having the player's actions lead into the story's themes helps greatly to bring the message home. The use of mechanic as metaphor is carefully constructed and extremely well thought out in *Little Inferno*. Every part of the game was united by a common thread, as every action the player takes contributes to this endless feedback loop of mindless consumption.
2. Atmosphere is everything. This game, while short, delivered an incredibly polished experience. The visuals and music of every aspect of the game, from the upbeat, cheesy mail-order catalogs to the somber tones of the endgame, all serve as ambiance in which the story and gameplay are perfectly framed.
3. Having a simple character with hidden depth is often more compelling than creating an extremely complex one. From Miss Nancy to Sugar Plumps, many of the characters in the narrative seem one-dimensional at first glance, gradually revealing their complexity. As the story progresses, the player picks up hints as to their true intentions, motivations, and personalities.

4. Taking control from the player at key moments and allowing the game to showcase the story is incredibly useful – often more so than a standard cutscene. Many modern games borrow this element from film – forcing the player to sit back as plot-relevant points play themselves out. However, Tomorrow Corporation has realized that game stories are best told when doing things only games can do, rather than trying to make a “cinematic” experience.
5. One needs to be careful when making a satirical game such as this one. The game straddles the line of Poe's Law of satire, namely that an extreme enough satire is often indistinguishable from the genuine object from which the parody arises. Many of the lower scores from reviewers seem (to me at least) to mistake the game's clunky mechanics and cyclical nature to be automatically elements of a bad game, rather than considering the way these things feed into the narrative.

Summation

Little Inferno, like *World of Goo* before it, provides a compelling, fun experience that dares to make the player think. It walks a path that few games follow, creating a narrative woven by themes that are rarely found in most media, let alone video games. It makes its players feel futility, loneliness, and even shame as its story goes on. The growing indie game culture has created a proving ground for unique storytelling and clever gameplay systems, and *Little Inferno* is a shining example – with only three members on its development staff, Tomorrow Corporation has crafted a story whose beauty can be realized once a glimpse is made into profound ugliness. It is one of very few games which have made me genuinely uncomfortable – forcing me to question exactly what it is I am doing. It sticks with you even after you have seen all that there is to see in the game. *Little Inferno* burns in the mind, bright like the sun. But is it rising, or is it setting?