

Game Narrative Review

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Your name: Thomas Trahey

Your school: Drexel University

Your email: tjt46@drexel.edu

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Game Title: Metro: Last Light

Platform: PC

Genre: Action-Adventure

Release Date: May 14 2013

Developer: 4A Games

Publisher: Deep Silver

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Andrew Prohorov (Director), Hew Beynon (Producer), Viacheslav Aristov (Designer)

Overview

The Metro series is set in a post-apocalyptic world torn apart from nuclear war. In order to survive, the people of Russia that remained fled to the metro tunnels underground. As a result, the metro grew into a structure of settlements connected by mutant infested tunnels. Life went on, and three main groups struggle for power: The Rangers of the Spartan Order, The Reds, and the Fourth Reich. *Metro: Last Light* explains this story through multiple methods, some of which are effective, and some of which could be greatly improved. From environmental details and conversations, to explicit differences in narrative outcome, *Metro* attempts to explain a rich and expansive plotline while allowing the player to become immersed in the process.

Metro: Last Light is an exceptional blend of strong narrative and fulfilling gameplay. The game works on a level for a wide-variety of players by offering a strong plot, while still giving the option for a hardcore shooter experience. Both the gameplay and the narrative are strong on their own, but when put together they complement each other and reward the player with a stimulating and immersive experience. The player's actions have a lasting effect, awarding moral points based on the morality of certain decisions. There are multiple endings to the game based on how many moral points are gained by the player's actions. If enough "good" has been done the player will receive the happier ending, but if not the default ending is seen instead. While this form of player-world interaction can be potentially effective, having two definite endings is painfully simple, and takes away from the player's true sense of impact.

In contrast, *Last Light* excels in its use of environmental storytelling, with both the setting and decoration of the metro, and the actors that interact within it. The player is given a chance to experience life in the metro first hand, and understand how the people of this reality are truly being affected. This gives the player a much stronger connection to the world than any optional ending could, and makes *Last Light* really stand out in a sea of "narrative shooters".

Characters

The characters of *Metro: Last Light* have a wide variety of backgrounds and motivations. Each one contributes something important to the game's narrative, and has an effect on how the player perceives what is going on. Like a sponge, the player absorbs everything the characters are saying and doing, and it's their job to then use that information to formulate their own understanding of the *Metro* universe.

- **Artyom** – The protagonist of the game, he is a skilled fighter in the Rangers of the Spartan Order. Artyom is a smart guy, and tends to be more understanding than many of his battle hardened brethren. He is a sentimental and kind person, which can be seen through the postcards he keeps in his room, as well as Hunter's dog tags (a friend who died during *Metro 2033*). Artyom's reactions to the story and his ideology are told through pre-level dialogue and various journal entries spread across the Metro. He attempts to understand the strange post-apocalyptic world he lives in and, more importantly, the Dark Ones. As a child he wandered out of the Metro to the surface, and made contact with the Dark Ones. They trusted him due to his childlike innocence and kind nature. Because of this, they trust his presence more than others, and use him as a means of communication. Artyom is torn by the guilt of launching the missile strike on the Dark Ones in *Metro 2033*, and uses his relationship with the little Dark One during the events of *Last Light*, to ascertain closure.
- **Little Dark One** – The little Dark One is believed to be the last remaining Dark One in existence. They are a highly intelligent mutant race, supposedly descending from human beings. The little Dark One was captured by the Fourth Reich, until Artyom set it free and they began traveling together. He has a childlike purity, and an overall understanding for good and evil. He even possesses the ability to not only read minds, but also their intentions and whether or not they are good or evil.
- **Khan** – When the game begins Khan is the first person the player meets and talks to. He is affiliated with the Spartans; however, he is more of an associate than a dedicated soldier. He is an insightful man, fairly old but wise due to his age. He is one of the few people that believe the Dark Ones have a right to live, and he frequently expresses this ideology with Artyom. Khan first spotted the little Dark One on the surface, and was ridiculed by other fellow Rangers for not wanting to kill it.
- **Anna** – Anna is Artyom's lover and also a fellow Ranger of the Order. She is an extremely talented sniper, and assists Artyom on the mission to find the little Dark One. She is outgoing and often jokes with Artyom even when in the middle of a high pressure situation. Her father, Miller, is the leader of the Ranger's, and he tends to be over protective of his daughter.
- **Pavel** – Throughout Artyom's journey through the metro, he meets many different people with a wide variety of back stories. As he was searching for the little Dark One in the beginning of the game, Pavel and a small group of Reds were doing the same.

When all of them were captured by the Fourth Reich, Artyom and Pavel were forced to work together against their common enemy. Still, Pavel is an extremely loyal soldier, and soon enough he was turning on Artyom in honor of the Red Army. Artyom and Pavel surely formed a friendship during their initial adventure, but Pavel's dedication to the Reds was too much to ignore.

- **Korbut** – General Korbut leads the Red Army through means of puppet strings. He used trickery and blackmail to get the upper hand on Maxim Moskvin (the true Red leader), and effectively call the shots. Korbut is ruthless in his actions and overall methodology, always looking for a quick way to get an advantage on a situation. He was even willing to sacrifice hundreds of lives in order to test the bio-weapon discovered in D6. Korbut used a truth serum on Artyom after his capture, which uncovered information on D6, as well as some repressed memories regarding Artyom's actions with the Dark Ones in the past.
- **Maxim Moskvin** – As the leader of the Red Army, Maxim should have been calling the shots. In reality Korbut, his Head of Intelligence, was pulling the strings from behind the scenes. He fed Maxim information saying that his brother Audrey was planning to murder him in order to cement his position as leader. Maxim was deceived by the rouse, and decided to poison his brother before he had a chance to make his move. After the deed was done, Korbut threatened to tell the public about what happened, sealing his control over the Red Army. Maxim was torn apart by the guilt, and turned to heavy drinking to numb the pain.
- **Lesnitski** – Served as a double agent for the Red Army, infiltrating the Rangers of the Spartan Order. He was the one who stole the bio-weapon for the Reds from under the Rangers' noses. Lesnitski is a ruthless soldier, also willing to massacre the innocent in order to test their bio-weapon from D6.

Breakdown

Prior to the game, a Ranger named Artyom goes on a mission through the metro that causes him to inevitably cross paths with a mutant race called the Dark Ones. These humanoid mutants have a vast intelligence compared to other mutants, even compared to the human race. Widely misunderstood, the Dark Ones were seen as evil creatures, and Artyom unavoidably was forced to eradicate their entire race, or so it would seem...

One year later, the plot of *Metro: Last Light* revolves around that fact that a surviving Dark One has been discovered. Artyom is given the task to find and eliminate it. However, the plot is taken off the rails rather quickly when the mission doesn't go as planned. Artyom is captured by members of the Fourth Reich, and is separated from the little Dark One. He is forced to make his way through the hostile metro making friends and enemies alike, ultimately striving to make

his way back to the little Dark One and decide its fate. Meanwhile, tensions are high between the major powers of the metro. The Rangers' have control of the old military facility called D6, but their enemies are desperate for leverage and a new war is right around the corner.

While many of the storytelling elements in *Last Light* are optional to take part in, some level of understanding of the story is necessary to at least realize what's going on. Because of this, a basic amount of the story is given whether or not the player is asking for it. An obvious example of this lies in the opening cut scene, which gives a basic overview of the plot prior to *Last Light*. After this, the player is thrown into a situation that involves Artyom finding the Little Dark One. Along the way, Khan discusses his philosophy with the player, giving insight on the moral issues being uncovered. A meeting is held with Artyom, Khan, Anna, and Miller regarding the situation, and at this point any player has had the opportunity to understand the whole of the story (or at least most of it).

After a breakout from a Nazi prison, Artyom is thrown into a situation where working with an enemy Red is the only option. Throughout the next few missions, Artyom and Pavel form a strong relationship, even though their organizations are bitter rivals. It shows a bleak hope for humanity, where two enemies can become friends in uncertain times. The two traveled together for multiple levels, and at one point Artyom risks his life to save Pavel from being hung by the Nazis. The two grew fairly close over the course of their partnership; however, once given the opportunity, Pavel turns on Artyom and hands him over to the Red Army. The player truly feels the betrayal, and this plays out later on when given the option to kill or spare Pavel's life. The drive for revenge will no doubt be strong, but the decision to kill Pavel seals a negative moral point for the player, making it harder to achieve the "good" ending of the game.

This kind of character interaction is used as a narrative tool throughout the entirety of the game. Artyom experiences the grim realities of the metro, and the way humans have adapted to the insane conditions. Utilizing this method of storytelling is extremely immersive, and can be enjoyed without even realizing it. Specifically, the Metro universe works well in tangent with this narrative technique due to the fact that so much of this alternate reality feeds off of the fact that the people of the Metro are all being affected. The settlements in the metro also serve as a mecca of character interaction and environmental storytelling. In fact, many of the interactions in these towns are necessary for moral points. Everywhere you look there is a chance to observe the details of character's lives. Entertainers work on the street, making shadow puppets and juggling for children. Beggars sit on the ground preaching about salvation for sins, and bars are littered with conversations that can be overheard. In one settlement a theatre show runs for over ten minutes, and on top of awarding a moral point, the player even earns an achievement. The list goes on, and the effort put into bringing these NPCs to life is exceptional. Areas that could be run through in minutes could take up to and over an hour to fully experience. As a result, the player gains a greater understanding of the narrative just by observing the environment and the actors within it. Even the most hardcore players with no interest in video games as a narrative device could find themselves becoming more absorbed in the story through the well painted world around them.

Another narrative device, that specifically gives insight to Artyom's personality, is the inner

monologue heard between each level. While waiting at each loading screen, Artyom discusses his reaction to what's taking place, as well as giving additional background and explaining some of the basis of his determination. While the player can skip this as soon as the level is loaded, the dialogue is great way to gain a further comprehension of the *Metro* universe and Artyom's connection to it. It forms a greater bond with our protagonist, seeing as nobody is hearing this monologue besides the player. Instead of an inner monologue, it becomes a one way conversation between Artyom and the player, much like how someone vents to a friend.

In addition to this dialogue, numerous journal entries written by Artyom are scattered across each zone. Not only do these letters give positive moral points, they delve even deeper into his psyche. They describe his dedication to the Order, and the need to prove himself to Miller and the others. While traveling with Pavel he writes about their growing relationship, and his pleasure to have a partner like him regardless of the political commitment. After the betrayal he swears his revenge, and gives more insight on the Red Army and the corruption within its ranks. Throughout the entirety of the game he also discusses his wavering views regarding his mission to kill the Dark One. After being under the effects of Korbut's truth serum, he reflects on the mission's goal, saying "I have no right to doubt, but... After all I recalled under the effect of Korbut's serum... I no longer know if I still want to carry that order out". Not only do the journal entries add a massive amount of depth to the story, a great amount of agency lies in the act of finding them. These hidden notes can be tricky to find, and they reward the player with new details on the *Metro* universe.

Even though there is usually only one or two of these journal entries hidden in each level, there are tons of other things for the player to discover that add more to the story (and possibly more moral points). Instruments lie dormant in the metro's towns, waiting to be strummed by a curious player. In the Reich prison Artyom and Pavel escape from, other prisoners can be found and set free. Hostages can be freed during a leveling involving a group of bandits. Dead bodies are found in the corners of the dangerous metro, giving the player the ability to picture stories for these people on their own. The environment is riddled with things that can be noticed by a careful observer, and they piece together a vivid and detailed world. In doing this, *Last Light* allows for an extensive lore that doesn't necessarily need to be explained in detail. The player can learn more about the narrative on their own initiative, which adds even another level of agency to the process. By putting effort into discovering storyline and plot points, the player feels a sense of satisfaction that doesn't come natural from simply listening to a monologue.

In the latter half of the game, the player is given the opportunity to either kill or spare three major antagonists. The lives of Pavel, Korbut, and Letskiski are put into Artyom's hands, and moral points are awarded to the player assuming they choose to spare them. This is difficult considering the personalities and pasts of each man, but *Last Light* seems to focus on ideas of forgiveness and understanding, which is no doubt why they reward sparing people that have wronged Artyom directly. On top of this, the Little Dark One is there to add his input as well, and his presence alone adds more weight to the decisions. Having the Little Dark One with you gives these decisions more agency due to the fact that your choice will also affect the child you're with, from their outlook on life, to the way they judge Artyom as a person.

Strongest Element

The strongest element in *Metro: Last Light* is the wide range of immersion at the player's disposal. There are environmental details that further the narrative in almost every area you look, assuming the player is willing and wanting to do so. Cities come to life in small but remarkable details, so much that hours can be spent in them. Journal pages are littered throughout almost every level, adding depth to the plot and backstory. A gamer heavily invested in story will have no problem looking for content that bolsters the narrative. In contrast, a hardcore shooter fan can ignore these narrative elements and dive straight into a mutant, Nazi, communist kill spree, without any hindrance to the gameplay. *Metro* satisfies the needs for multiple types of players, and does so in a solid and memorable way.

Unsuccessful Element

While your actions affect the overall ending to the story, the game lacks a real sense of agency in the moral points system. There are only two endings, characterized as "good" and "bad", and the only way to get the good ending is by completing a certain set of tasks. Assuming you miss enough of these tasks, the good ending is now off the table as a possibility. Although the moral point opportunities serve to strengthen the narrative regardless of their impact on the ending, this is not nearly enough agency to make the player's decisions and actions truly mean something in the world around them.

Highlight

Character interaction is always important in story development, and the way the Little Dark One interacts with Artyom and others towards the end of the game is one of the most insightful parts of the entire game. Dark Ones are seen as horrible and evil creatures to most people, yet the little one is just the opposite. He shows a likeness to human children, and disproves any notion that the Dark Ones are naturally violent and destructive. On the surface, the Little Dark One dons clothing made from ragged cloth to imitate humans. He also shows an understanding of mercy and compassion when discussing the Red soldiers and the kill/live decisions. While traveling through Polis disguised as a human boy, the Little Dark One acts as if it truly was a human child. He waves to Rangers, and walks around with an innocence only seen in children. It's amazing thinking about how harmless this "monster" really is, when everyone in the Metro thinks of them as creatures from Hell. Seeing the Little Dark One in this new light leaves a dramatic impact on the player, and demonstrates that humans and Dark Ones are not so different. It gives notable insight into the possible relationship the two races could form together, and even gives the player a relatable situation that could potentially connect with many of the judgmental social issues found in our society today.

Critical Reception

Metro: Last Light received largely positive reviews, and has a metacritic score of 82 [1].

Colin Moriarty at IGN [2] gave *Last Light* a 7.2 out of 10. He praised the amount of detail

sown into the game's post-apocalyptic setting, saying that "The more time you spend exploring, listening, reading, and watching, the more you appreciate what 4A Games has created". He does however critique the enemy AI, and the story's supernatural turn towards the end of the game, seeing as it tears the player from reality in a game that is strengthened by the harshness of such a realistic setting.

Philip Kollar at polygon.com [3] gave *Last Light* an 8.5 out of 10. He also commended 4A for their fleshed out world, and strong narrative tools. He states "Each new location builds its own story organically, through incidental dialogue as you pass by NPCs, bodies that litter the ground and (sometimes literal) ghosts haunting every room". Philip also had some technical issues with the game, however he believed the technical issues were worth the experience.

Lessons

- Including strong narrative and gameplay doesn't have to be an "either or" decision. By allowing players to explore the details of your environment at their own leisure, you give them the option of a rich narrative without forcing it on them. This helps to prevent targeting one specific audience, and also increases the chance that your players will be interested in the narrative whether they realize it or not.
- Environmental detail can tell a story as well as a narrator if not even better. By creating an immersive world through small but memorable details, you suck the player into a more realistic narrative. This includes realistic NPC interaction seen in the metro's lively cities, and minor details throughout the world's dangerous areas.
- By having a small limited amount of endings that are defined by a strict to-do list, you take away the multitude of possibilities staged in such a well-crafted world. The player should be able to see their actions make a meaningful difference on the world around them, in greater effect than one single "good" or "bad" climax.

Summation

Metro: Last Light continues the *Metro* series with a well told story and an enjoyable experience. 4A used many techniques that explore how a story can be told directly and indirectly, and they succeeded in many of these areas. Most notably, they created a comprehensive world that immerses the player and strengthens the narrative through environmental detail and character interaction.

References

1. Metacritic. Internet: <http://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/metro-last-light> [May 25, 2014]
2. C. Moriarty, "Metro: Last Light Review, A Light at the End of the Tunnel". Internet: <http://www.ign.com/articles/2013/05/13/metro-last-light-review>, May 13, 2013 [May 25, 2014]
3. P. Kollar, "Metro: Last Light Review: red scare". Internet: <http://www.polygon.com/game/metro-last-light/3076>, May 13, 2013 [May 25, 2014]