

Game Narrative Review

Name: Stav Hinenzon
School: DigiPen Institute of Technology
E-mail: stav.hinenzon@gmail.com
Month/Year Submitted: December 2016

Game Title: Sunless Sea
Platform: Windows, OS X, Linux
Genre: Roguelike Roleplaying Game
Release Date: February 6th, 2015
Developer: Failbetter Games
Publisher: Failbetter Games
Creative Director/Lead Writer: Alexis Kennedy

Overview

Sunless Sea is a roguelike roleplaying game in which the player takes the role of a sea captain who sets out to explore the Unterzee, a bizarre and dangerous ocean. Deep below the world is a place called the Neath, where the normal laws of reality do not apply. As part of a pact made between Queen Victoria and otherworldly forces, London has been transported down into this alien realm. The distressed city now lies on the coast of a vast sea, the Unterzee, which is filled with blood-thirsty monsters, sanity-shredding horrors, and sometimes – great powers. The people willing to brave this treacherous environment come from many different backgrounds and have many different ambitions, but they all share the ability to dive headfirst into the unknown.

The player starts their career as a captain with only a little money, an old boat, and a small room above a tavern. They are barely able to afford enough fuel and supplies for their first voyage. Making the journey profitable will be another challenge entirely. Slowly, they will earn enough money to afford a ship able to take on larger foes, a house able to provide proper amenities between trips, and enough supplies to travel to the farthest edges of the Unterzee. These faraway places are more profitable, but they also contain even greater terrors, some of which pose a threat to the entire Neath. Attrition will remain a constant looming threat. If they aren't stranded in the middle of the ocean, betrayed by their crew, or driven insane by an otherworldly terror, maybe the player will be able to fulfill their ambitions.

Characters

A) The Captain

“You know something of the Unterzee”

The player character and the game’s protagonist. Upon character creation, the player decides on the captain’s background, which determines their initial attribute scores, as well as their ambition: this playthrough’s primary quest. The player can choose to be addressed by a wide variety of terms, some of which are gender-neutral. The game never assumes the captain’s gender.

B) The Officers

The Sigil-Ridden Navigator

“Has that tattoo grown since last you looked?”

The Sigil-Ridden Navigator remembers nothing of his past, including how he got the large sigil covering his face. All he knows is that it’s eating away at what’s left of his mind, and that it’s spreading. The red priests at the Chapel of Light might be able to restore his memories. He just needs to find a ship that will take him there. Luckily, he’s a skilled navigator, although he’s not sure when he became one.

The Haunted Doctor

“Earnest, learned, prone to jump at loud noises.”

Once, the Haunted Doctor was filled with fire. He saw the injustices happening in London every day and it filled him with anger. Deciding to change things, he eagerly joined the Calendar Council in their revolutionary cause. He sacrificed much for them, including his eye, and he did many things that he would rather forget. Eventually, he could no longer justify his own actions, so he ran away. The fire within him burns much dimmer now, but he still sees the same injustices around him, and he still hopes that things might change one day.

The Presbyterate Adventuress

“If she’s afraid of anything, it’s boredom”

The Presbyterate Adventuress has lived for over a hundred years. In those years, she has explored faraway places, studied a wide array of subjects, and defeated countless foes; however, her adventures will soon have to come to an end. The Presbyterate is hunting her down for a crime her father committed, and she won’t be able to evade her hunters for long. She knows she will die, but she wants to do it on her own terms, fighting a legendary foe.

The Genial Magician

“He's a good engineer, despite that missing hand. But sailors fall silent when he passes”

The Genial Magician is unfailingly polite, and he smiles constantly. That smile will disappear if you ask him about his hand. A snake from the world beyond the mirror bit it off, ending his career as a magician. Killing that snake is the only thing that concerns him now. It's difficult to harm a creature that lives on another plane of existence, but that doesn't deter him. He will sacrifice anything for his quest, including his life.

The Irrepressible Cannoneer

“Cheery enthusiasm is a welcome, but unnerving, trait in a gunner.”

Their past is as mysterious as their pronouns. The Irrepressible Cannoneer seems to have contacts in many different ports. Their shared history with this group of people is largely unknown, but it involved a lot of explosions. They are currently looking to finish their work on a weapon whose prototype might have blasted a hole through the Neath's ceiling.

The Bandaged Poissonnier

“He has an ambition for fish. A great ambition”

The Bandaged Poissonnier has devoted his life to the art of cooking. Throughout his long career, he has cooked for barons, bishops, the Kahn, and the Empress, but this is not enough for him. He knows that his physical condition is deteriorating, and his time is running out, so he intends to cook a meal for which he will truly be remembered. He joins your crew to find the Neath's most exotic ingredients to cook a meal for the Neath's most exotic patron: The Fathomking.

The Carnelian Exile

“She has the discomfiting – even irritating – habit of answering your questions just before you finish speaking”

The Carnelian Exile is a philosophical woman. She struggles with questions of choice and destiny. In her search for answers, she's worked with The New Sequencers on The Dawn Machine, but she learned something they did not want her to know. She is no longer welcome among them. Now, she is searching for Salt, the goddess of secrets, travelling, and farewells. To achieve that goal, she must sail East, to the end of the zee.

C) The Powers of the Unterzee

The Admiralty

“God bless Her Enduring Majesty, the Empress”

The newest faction to arrive in the Neath, London is desperate to establish a foothold in this alien land. The Admiralty stands at the forefront of this effort, expanding London's influence in the name of the Empress (formerly known as Queen Victoria). They will pay good money to any zee captain brave enough to explore the Neath's obscure and exotic locales. They will pay even better money to a captain who can bring in useful information about London's many newly acquired rivals. Unfortunately, a hidden faction, The New Sequencers, has begun to rise from within the Admiralty's ranks.

The New Sequencers

“UN. THE SUN. THE SUN. THE SUN. THE SU”

The judgements, the stars, are the ultimate source of law in the universe. Their light decides what is and what is not. The Neath has no judgment to rule over it. The New Sequencers hoped to change that. They set out to build an artificial sun, the Dawn Machine, that would allow them to control the laws of nature in The Neath, and they succeeded. They now worship their creation, and The Dawn Machine leads them towards its own agenda. It will bring its order to The Neath whether the inhabitants are willing or not.

The Fathomking

“Somewhere below, the King waits”

Far beneath the waves, The Fathomking sits on his sea-stone throne. He is the lord of those lost at sea. His palace is filled with drowned servants who obey his mercurial whims. If your captain seeks an audience with him, they will need to tell him a story: The Fathomking loves a good story. Once they meet him, the captain can ask The Fathomking to return one of their fallen officers. For the right price, he'll oblige, but he can't promise they'll come back the same.

The Empire of Hands

“The apes watch you hungrily”

The Pentecost Apes of The Empire of Hands desperately wish that they were human. They hoard human souls, extracting mannerisms and memories in hopes of understanding the heart of humanity, but their lack of a true independent perspective makes that understanding impossible. Their frustration about this fact, combined with London's disdainful attitude towards them, can sometimes turn their envy towards humanity into a seething hatred. The apes have been building a zeppelin that will take them away from the scorn and embargos of London and bring them to a new prosperous land.

The New Kahnate

“London’s Rival. An oasis of light in the salt black wastes”

When London was dragged into the Neath, it landed on top of Karakorum, the previous city taken by the Masters. Not many of the city’s people survived the crash, but those who did have set up a new home in the eastern region of the Unterzee. The New Kahnate is the only faction to rival London in terms of political powers. Because of this, the two cities always keep a watchful eye on each other. The Kahnate’s culture is much stricter than London’s. Every corner of the city is closely overseen by the White-and-Golds, the vigilant city guard. They are especially wary of foreigners, whose access to the city is heavily restricted.

The Drowned Man

“He came from the North, and to the North he will return”

The Drowned Man is worshiped by the smiling priests of the Chapel of Lights and the quiet villagers of Quaker’s Haven. This worship is kept secret because The Drowned Man is not a god: he came from a place too cold for gods. The only thing known about His past is that long ago His brothers and sisters, whoever they may be, ate Him, drowned Him, and left Him for dead. His followers often partake in cannibalism, and if your captain joins the rituals, they might start feeling unaccountably peckish as well.

The Calendar Council

“LO THY DREAD EMPIRE CHAOS IS RESTORED LIGHT DIES BEFORE THY UNCREATING WORD”

Back on the surface, a wave of anarchism is sweeping across Europe. This revolutionary new school of thought has found its way to the Neath, and The Calendar Council are its chief advocates in London. They’re new, and they’re largely unpopular among the general populace, but they won’t let that stop them. They are willing to go to lengths their surface counterparts will not. They hate the Empress’ rule with a passion, and if they can put an end to it, no means are too extreme.

Breakdown

On the surface, *Sunless Sea* may seem like just a roguelike roleplaying game; however, there is an additional essential nuance to the game’s genre. *Sunless Sea* is a work of speculative fiction. One of the most important aspects of any piece of speculative fiction is its world-building, and this game excels in that area. Its remarkably original setting separates the game from its peers, creates thematic cohesiveness, and allows for greater player expression. By realizing the potential of one of fantasy and science fiction’s core pillars, *Sunless Sea* crafts a far more meaningful experience for its players.

Sunless Sea's world begins to set itself apart right from its inspirations. The game's world abandons the traditional Tolkien-esque trappings of good versus evil in favor of 19th century gothic and cosmic horror. The game's gothic roots are immediately evident in its prose. The impressionistic, dream-like descriptions and the slow-burning sense of dread are hallmarks of gothic literature. The game's items further cement this connection. Along with mundane items such as coffee, silk, and wine, your captain may trade in terrible secrets, human souls, and love stories, evoking the romantic themes of the genre. The game invokes cosmic horror through its many horrifying adversaries. Between the Dawn Machine, the Drowned Man, and countless other horrors, the world is filled with terrible powers the player can't even hope to face unscathed, much less defeat. The naval setting also brings to mind H. P. Lovecraft's canon, particularly stories such as "Dagon" or "The Call of Cthulhu". The game's mechanics reinforce this aspect of the narrative through the terror meter, which reflects the madness motif often found in cosmic horror. From the foundation of its world building, *Sunless Sea* sets out to make a setting that stands apart from most fantasy games.

Building upon the foundation of 19th century horror, *Sunless Sea* creates a unique setting that elevates the game to the status of compelling fantasy. Rather than being a mere pastiche, the game takes original ideas and realizes them using the tools and aesthetics of familiar genres. For example, when the game wants to present an existential horror to menace its world, it does not borrow from Lovecraft's large library of cosmic terrors. Instead, it gives us the Dawn Machine, an original creation. This villain shares certain aspects of Lovecraft's Great Old Ones: it is powerful, abstract, and sanity eroding. But distinct motifs of light, law, and machinery separate the Dawn Machine and, by extension, the setting from Lovecraft's works and give them an individual flavor. The result is a game that stands out from other titles with similar inspirations.

The well-crafted world not only makes the game more distinct, but more meaningful as well. Good world-building works to reinforce the game's themes, creating a stronger experience. This can manifest both in individual areas as well as broader aspects of the setting. One of the Neath's islands is a large ominous gate called the Avid Horizon, and it is the northernmost point of the Unterzee. If they sail north, the player will always reach the Avid Horizon. Regardless of longitude, they will always reach the exact same place, with the same towering gate looming over them. This inevitability creates a feeling of hopelessness that perfectly fits the theme of cosmic horror. The wider geography of the Neath also furthers thematic cohesiveness. One of the game's major themes is isolation, and to evoke that feeling the game has the player manually sail across large expanses of empty ocean to get from place to place. This is made possible by the fact that the Unterzee is an archipelago, and each city is surrounded by miles of water. This would not be the case if the game were simply set in Europe, which is a continent. These places and details provide another important venue through which the game can deliver its core experience.

While certain islands provide cohesiveness, others provide variety. Creating an original setting gives the developer greater freedom to create areas that deviate from the

game's usual tone. The Empire of Hands is an island with a relatively lighthearted tone populated by apes who struggle to understand humanity. This would be out of place in Lovecraft's or Poe's world, but this is Failbetter's world. They have much more freedom there, and they use that freedom to explore ideas they otherwise couldn't have.

In addition to giving the game more ways to convey itself, *Sunless Sea's* world gives the player more ways to express themselves. During character creation, the game places great emphasis on allowing the player to create a character they can project themselves onto. They can decide on meaningful aspects of their character such as background, ambitions, and even gender identity. That last one is where this particular game stands out, as well as where the world-building comes in. When the player chooses the title by which they want to be addressed, they may choose from several gender-neutral options like citizen and captain. Regardless of the title chosen, the game's prose never assumes the character's gender. Additionally, the game features multiple non-binary characters, including the Irrepressible Cannoneer, a recruitable companion. The setting makes doing all this easier because it helps free the game from the prejudices of the actual 19th century. *Sunless Sea* has little obligation to stay true to the attitudes of Victorian England because it's not set in Victorian England. It's set in the Neath, and the people of the Neath are accepting of non-binary people. *Sunless Sea* uses the lens of fantasy to filter out restrictive aspects of its historical setting, allowing greater freedom of expression for the players.

World-building is an aspect of narrative where games have a distinct advantage over other mediums. The freedom of exploration granted by interactivity, combined with large time investments that games allow, enables the creation of worlds with unparalleled levels of detail. *Sunless Sea* realizes the potential of its world by using it to craft a more cohesive, meaningful, and accessible experience.

Strongest Element

The strongest element of *Sunless Sea* is the sheer variety of its locales. The game has thirty-nine different islands, and Failbetter manages to imbue each one with some memorable characteristic. Certain islands, such as Kahn's Heart, are identified by their deep connection to a particular faction. Other islands have recurring motifs, like the Principles of Coral and its crystal chess pieces. Some islands just have an amusing quirk. For example, the people of Wither can only speak in questions, and they exile those who don't. These identifying characteristics create an endearing familiarity over time, strengthening the player's bond to the world.

Unsuccessful Element

The least compelling part of a *Sunless Sea* playthrough will be its early stages. At the start of the game, the player has almost no resources. They will only be able to buy enough supplies to travel to a few islands. The problem is that the amount of money earned from a journey depends on the number of islands visited, so the player will

barely be able to make profit. Although this small profit should be enough to afford a slightly longer and more profitable trip, the build-up is too slow. The end-result is that before meaningfully interacting with the world and the narrative at all, the player will have to spend hours grinding to build up their finances to a point where they make trips long enough to complete any major quests. The game's roguelike elements make this flaw even more glaring. Every death means a massive loss of progress, forcing the player to replay those dull first trips.

Highlight

When a player returns to London after a trip they just barely survived, the game's mechanics and themes come together to form a powerful emotional moment. When terror is high, supplies are low, and the player has been sailing alone, scared that you might not make it, London's docks provide an incredible relief. The city's bright lights not only create a welcoming visual, but prevent terror from increasing. A supply ship is stationed right outside the dock entrance, and the city itself offers cheap fuel and food. Finally, whenever your ship sails into the harbor a bright hopeful tune cuts through the game's usual ominous ambiance. All of these cues indicate that although the journey was hard, they have made it. All the pent-up stress of the trip is released in a truly cathartic moment.

Critical Reception

In his review for PCGamer, Chris Thursten summarizes *Sunless Sea* as possessing “a seductive but intangible atmosphere that draws you in, punctured by jutting flaws that rise up from time to time to scatter that atmosphere to the wind”¹. This sentiment describes much of the critical consensus surrounding the game. Many reviews praise the game's mood and setting while criticizing its slow early game and uninspired combat system. Simon Parkin of Eurogamer centered his review on the game's modular storytelling, writing that “If a game is a series of meaningful choices... then *Sunless Sea* is more game than most”². He awarded the game with a perfect score and marked it as a Eurogamer essential. The game has a Metascore of 81, indicating “generally favorable reviews”³. The Writer's Guild of Great Britain nominated the game for “Best Writing in a Video Game” at the 2016 Writer's Guild Awards⁴

¹ Thursten, Chris. *Sunless Sea Review*. <http://www.pcgamer.com/sunless-sea-review/>. PCGamer. 2015.

² Parkin, Simon. *Sunless Sea Review*. <http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2015-02-06-sunless-sea-review>. Eurogamer. 2015.

³ Sunless Sea. <http://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/sunless-sea/critic-reviews>. Metacritic. 2014.

⁴ Writers' Guild Award winners 2016. <https://writersguild.org.uk/writers-guild-award-winners-2016/>. Writer's Guild of Great Britain. 2016.

Lessons

Fantasy doesn't have to be medieval– When world-building for their game, creators should remember that the genre of fantasy is broader than the worlds presented by Tolkien, D&D, and their descendants. There is a wide array of cultures, places, and time periods to draw inspiration from. An original, vibrant world can come from unexpected sources.

Diversity creates accessibility – People like seeing themselves in fiction. Populating one's game with people from a wider array of ethnicities, backgrounds, and genders will make your game appeal to a greater variety of people.

Mechanics can inform world-building – a game's mechanics are the rules of its world. By looking at these rules, developers can get a better idea of what kind of world the game is set in. Allowing these rules to shape the narrative results in more cohesive games.

Summation

From foundation to execution, *Sunless Sea's* setting stands as a model of successful world-building. It meaningfully borrows ideas from rich genres of literature. It then puts these ideas through a new lens and makes them its own. This allows the game to have more cohesive themes and greater choice. The result is a more meaningful experience for the players.