

Prey

Narrative Review

Platform: PC

Genre: First-person shooter

Release Date: July 11, 2006

Developer: Human Head Studios

Publishers: 2K Games, 3D Realms

Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Scott Miller and Chris Treagus

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Overview

Prey is a science fiction first person shooter developed by Human Head Studios. It follows a Native American named Domasi Tawodi (Tommy) through a physical and spiritual journey of discovery and self realization resulting in a clear and well-developed premise (what a character learns due to the events in the story). Tommy, a distraught mechanic living on a reservation in Oklahoma, desires a drastic change in his life and to escape from his reservation with his girlfriend Jen. He is then forced to take action when an alien ship known as the Sphere launches a large scale invasion of earth with the goal of harvesting all life from the planet, and the entire Roadhouse Inn with Jen, Tommy, and Tommy's grandfather Enisi inside is lifted into the invading ship.

Tommy's journey through the Sphere closely parallels Joseph Campbell's Monomyth (the hero's journey). Each aspect of the Monomyth is touched upon during Prey, and the character interactions and development required to achieve such a feat are all present. During Prey, Tommy must reach an internal balance between his world mask and true self to save himself, his world, and those other world endangered by the Sphere. The story is further told without breaking the first person perspective and without forcing the player to relinquish physical control of Tommy. Rather than resorting to cut-scenes or the silent protagonist common throughout the first person shooter genre, Prey tells its story with a self aware and commutative protagonist that both maintains the player's feeling of immersion and allows the character to experience various quandaries and resolutions throughout the game.

Characters

- Domasi Tawodi (aka Tommy) – The protagonist and player avatar during Prey. Before being abducted by the Sphere he worked in a garage on an Indian reservation. He wishes to abandon the reservation but cannot convince Jen to leave with him.

- Enisi – Tommy’s grandfather. Unlike Tommy, Enisi values his Native American culture and heritage. He realizes Tommy’s importance during the story and attempts to help heal the tear between Tommy and his heritage. Enisi acts as a guide throughout much of Prey, providing supernatural and spiritual aid to the player during key points in the game.
- Jen – Tommy’s girlfriend. Before being abducted worked in the Roadhouse, a local inn she owns on their reservation. Unlike Tommy, Jen does not want to leave the reservation. Throughout Prey, slight glimpses of Jen give Tommy hope and desire to continue. As such, she is used as a lure by the Mother to lead Tommy into a trap at the end.
- Talon – Tommy’s pet hawk from his childhood and spirit guide throughout the game. Talon gives Tommy the ability to understand the alien language in the sphere, distract enemies during fights, and give hints to the path that the player should choose.
- Elhuit – The leader of a resistance group inside the Sphere known as “The Hidden.” She provides aid to Tommy during the game and helps progress the story and tie up the story.
- The Mother – Leader and controller of the Sphere, the alien ship attacking Earth. Formally an abductee of the Sphere, she now is its commander and chief as a result of the spiritual abilities that both herself and Tommy possess. After recognizing Tommy’s powers she sets out to instate him as a possible replacement controller of the Sphere.

Breakdown

Prey follows Tommy as he experiences Joseph Campbell’s classic journey of the hero to reach an internal and mental balance. The story is told entirely through dialog and the actions of others in the world. Physical control of Tommy is given to the player (except the ability to speak) for almost the entire duration of the game and the story is experienced directly through Tommy’s eyes in the first person camera perspective. Tommy himself consists of four nested masks¹: his world mask or the image of himself currently as seen by others, his self-image or what he imagines he should appear to be, his consciousness or his personal values and morals, and his true self or the bedrock of his personality, feelings, and his spiritual and mental self. Tommy begins his journey in conflict, he is a Native American on a reservation longing for a change but unwilling to do so and abandon Jen. To reach atonement Tommy embarks on a forced journey when he is captured by the alien mothership known as The Sphere as it begins harvesting the people of earth, this serves as Tommy’s call to adventure with regard to the journey of the hero.

When Tommy is freed by members of the resistance group, “The Hidden,” he is free to pursue any path he wishes. Tommy immediately sets out to fulfill his self-image, to rescue Jen and escape from the Sphere to live a normal life. This quickly leads to Tommy’s death, causing him to awake in the Spirit World with his grandfather Enisi. This is Tommy’s meeting with his mentor, he is unable to progress as he is currently dead, and Enisi subjects Tommy to several trials so that he may attain ancient spiritual abilities. Rather than finish his training of spiritual abilities, Tommy refuses his grandfather’s pleas to

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Andrew Glassner, Interactive Storytelling Techniques for 21st Century Fiction (Massachusetts: Coyote Wind, 2004) 43-5

battle the Sphere and save earth. Tommy is granted life, but again attempts to complete his self-image by rescuing Jen and escaping the Sphere.

Part of the hero's journey is tests, allies, and enemies. The game itself is setup as a variety of tests, forcing the player as Tommy to solve odd spatial puzzles involving a variety of portals and plays on gravity. Despite the relative abundance of entities throughout the Sphere who will only rest when your blood runs cold, there are a few key enemies represented in the game as bosses. The most prominent of which is the Mother, who acts as the goddess of the sphere. She has total control of the happenings in the Sphere, and communicates with Tommy attempting to lure him into an alliance with the Sphere.

Despite the relative abundance of enemies, Tommy also discovers allies amongst the Sphere's inhabitants known as The Hidden. Their leader is Elhuit, who plays a pivotal role in Tommy's internal struggle. Throughout Prey, Tommy has been realizing the strength of his powers granted to him by his heritage, his true self. After meeting with Elhuit and members of the Hidden, Tommy begins to adapt his consciousness and self-image to align with his true self.

Shortly after his meeting with Elhuit Tommy seeks atonement with the father, in this case his grandfather. Enisi has always represented Tommy's true self and Tommy's link with his Native American heritage that his self-image had been rejecting. Tommy's return to the spirit world to atone with Enisi also represents his acceptance of his role as Earth's savior. Before he can complete the final tests to unlock his full spiritual abilities, Tommy is forced to retreat back into the Sphere when a massive offensive is launched by the Sphere into the Spirit World itself, known to Enisi as the "Land of the Ancients," the one safe place for the spirits of the Native Americans.

With his quest's goal changed fully from saving Jen to saving the Earth, the Land of the Ancients, and any other worlds threatened by the Sphere, Tommy reaches the portion of the journey of the hero commonly referred to as Approaching the Cave. This is preceded by a particularly complex puzzle leading to a dark hallway that physically constructs itself as Tommy progresses. Here Tommy must face a series of Ordeals. A door opens to reveal Jen's torso grafted onto the body of a particularly large gun-toting enemy controlled by the Mother. Here Tommy's self image is directly brought to the forefront, if he kills this enemy Jen will die but if he joins the Mother and the Sphere then he will wield the power to create and destroy worlds and Jen could be returned to normal. After killing Jen, Tommy is presented a lifeless planet sized rock upon which he is given the ability to plant the seeds of life, a show of the power he may wield.

Once the planet has been prepared, the Mother herself addresses Tommy, which can be seen as the meeting with the Goddess. Tommy first encountered the Mother wandering around as a spirit, and startled her when she found that she was visible to Tommy. Since that meeting, the mother reveals that she had been following his progress throughout the Sphere, testing how he could handle various enemies and tasks, and luring him forward by offering glimpses of Jen being carried through the Sphere. She reveals that Tommy's actions had led her both to the Land of the Ancients and the hideout of the Hidden, both of which will soon be destroyed. This entirely breaks Tommy's mental structure; his world mask, self-image, and consciousness are torn apart as he realizes that his actions have ruined everything that he had worked and hoped for. Tommy is then forced to rebuild his mental structure, and rather than giving into the Mother he engages and defeats

her in battle.

By destroying the Mother, Tommy is selected by the Sphere to be its controller. Suddenly Tommy finds himself with virtually unlimited power and a chance to reconstruct his cognitive faculties while exposed to temptation of power the Sphere presents him. Before Tommy finishes the Sphere's work in harvesting earth and destroying the Land of the Ancients, Enisi appears to him in a vision. Building on Tommy's true self Enisi convinces Tommy to drive the Sphere into the Sun. This also happens to be the first part of the game when the player cannot control Tommy, and it proceeds to tell the ending as a sort of sparsely interactive ending cinematic. Tommy is then resurrected and returned home, completing the hero's journey. Despite nearly sacrificing everything, even his life, for the people of Earth, none of the people left know of his exploits or even what had happened during the time of his absence. The only acknowledgement of his sacrifices occurs when Elhuit returns to express the interest and gratitude of many civilizations and worlds threatened by the Sphere's existence.

Through the use of various narrative devices as well as creative game design, Prey tells a deep though linear story in a way only possible in a video game. By placing the player in full control of Tommy and never removing that control, the player physically becomes the hero fighting off a devastating intergalactic force as well as fighting off a devastating internal conflict. The hero's journey is masterfully tied in with the player's progression through the game and the protagonist's own internal struggle leading to a fun, intuitive, and relatively deep gameplay experience.

Strongest Element

The strongest element in Prey is its usage of the hero's journey in the context of a first person shooter to compose an interesting narrative of a dynamic protagonist. By employing the first person perspective, the player doesn't just follow the development of the character as would be common in non-interactive media, but experiences firsthand his decisions and actions. Many games such as Halo and Doom 3 attempt to tell key points of the story via cut-scenes where the player is yanked from this façade of being the protagonist and is forced to watch his character walk around, talk, and interact on its own. Similarly, games such as Half-Life and BioShock maintain this first person perspective except for an intro and outro cinematic but never allow the protagonist to speak relying entirely on supporting characters to move the story forward and sometimes even speak for the protagonist, starving the player of the full internal struggle present in Prey's protagonist. By leveraging narrative techniques honed over the ages through non-interactive mediums, and the full immersive depth only achievable in an interactive medium such as a PC game, Prey is able to deliver a deep and insightful experience without sacrificing elements such as fun factor and immersion vital to a game's success.

Unsuccessful Element

By allowing Tommy to perform his own dialog, the player then may end up in many instances experiencing a conflicting mental state with the very character he or she is controlling. For example, for much of the game I was much more interested in destroying the Sphere and the spirit powers than saving

Jen, and when Tommy announced that he wanted to leave the Land of the Ancients the first time I was frustrated with him as I wanted to complete the tests and gain all the spirit powers. This would be akin to watching a horror movie and screaming, "don't walk up the stairs!" while the protagonist slowly ascends but leaves the player with more of a feeling of being cheated. If the player is playing the character, why should he have to walk up the stairs if he doesn't want to?

Had Human Head implemented some sort of dialog system for the player to use, the short term clashes between the player's desired decisions and Tommy's actual decisions may be minimized. Games such as Mass Effect do implement this, at the cost of player immersion. The flow of the game is interrupted by a dialog box that prompts the user for his or her preferred choice in a situation. In a game like Prey, where cut scenes and even the death screen were so expertly avoided, this would serve as a major annoyance and removal from the game world. A system could conceivably be implemented that would allow the player to answer simple yes or no questions by shaking their mouse up and down or left and right (to nod or shake the character's head), or even a rudimentary voice input system reminiscent of old text based adventures (you would say a sentence and the in-game reactions would be based on various keywords).

Barring the technical hurdles of this last option, it could conceivably create a situation where the player chooses to avoid one or more key scenes for Tommy's development and minimize the ultimate effect of the story's premise. If I don't want to save Jen, never leave the Land of the Incients, and jump in as commander and chief of the Sphere I've just avoided every major choice and quandary in the game and completely eliminated the message that it expressed.

Ultimately, the best approach would seem to be the fixed storyline that Prey implements. One could conceivably give the player a greater feeling of choice by allowing him control of the order in which the events occur. Unfortunately to fully develop a character such as Tommy, he must make choices that the player may not agree with to keep the story interesting and fully develop the premise.

Highlight

The highest point during Prey's narrative is Tommy's return to the Land of the Incients. Upon returning, Tommy reconciles with Enisi and is about to be presented with additional trials in order to gain additional supernatural abilities to use against the Sphere. Just as it seems the internal conflict Tommy harbored throughout the game would be resolved, portals open throughout the area and a massive offensive is launched from the Sphere against this seemingly safe area of recluse. The scene itself is designed to evoke a feeling of anger from the player and send Tommy on a vengeful rampage by both revoking an emotional resolution in the story, which it achieves very successfully and provides a smooth transition into the game's finale. Additionally, the scene was referenced by the Mother when she reveals that he was the tool that made the invasion possible in an attempt to break down his cognitive faculties.

Critical Reception

Gamerankings.com gave Prey 84%, and metacritic.com gave it 83%. Some sources enjoyed it noticeably more than others, with Armchair Empire giving it a 90% whereas GameSpy awarded it with a 70%. Prey's recycling of the design paradigms and structure of other games and first person shooters is often cited as its major downfall, whereas others applaud Prey for the skill with which it incorporates elements of other shooters and story into a solid gameplay experience.

John Tait from Armchair Empire in particular enjoyed Prey's integration of story and gameplay. Tait explains that, "The barebones story most often doesn't pretend to be anything more than a pretext for slaughter, it is surprisingly affecting in places." He continues to explain that he found himself, "Filled with righteous anger as I watched alien atrocities," and, "I found myself actually caring about Tommy's main quest, rescuing Jen." Although Prey is an action game and keeps that as its primary focus, the story gives it a unique and engaging atmosphere that helps it rise above its contemporaries in the first person shooter genre.

Lessons

1. It is possible to tell an engaging and complex story without abandoning the first person perspective. Although it is very tempting to take control of a player's character to advance a story and detail relationships and interactions between primary characters, it is possible to get the same depth and complexity without doing so.

1 Protagonist dialog can be successful in a first person game. First person shooters generally avoid allowing the player character to verbally communicate while under the control of the player to avoid any disagreements the player may have to the protagonist's actions. Despite its drawbacks, the player experiences a greater satisfaction when he experiences the resolution of conflict rather than being an aide to a secondary character's premise or watching their character's key developmental steps as a video rather than playing them as a game.

2 The illusion of choice can be effective in lieu of full player interaction with the story. Allowing the player to dictate the protagonist's action in key points of the story can result in extremely large plot trees and avoid carefully crafted twists and quandaries. Despite Prey being entirely linear it succeeds in giving the player a feeling of control and choice throughout the game which effectively deepened the player's experience during the outcome of the story.

3 The Monomyth is easily translated from a non-interactive medium such as books or movies to an interactive medium such as video games. Further, even if the particular developmental paths through the story are fixed and outside of player control, even the feeling of being a part of such a large scale adventure is sufficient enough to warrant the translation of the Monomyth into videogames.

Summation

Prey is an interesting game, as it is driven by a deep and impressive plot in a genre classically void of story or premise. By providing its players with a driving force other than “kill the bad guys,” it is able to form a unique connection to what would otherwise be a somewhat generic shooter. Prey is also able to create this experience without reverting to the generic cop-outs of cut-scenes or the silent protagonist, and never sacrifices gameplay or immersion to promote its story. A player from the very first scene feels as though he is Domasi Tawodi and is rarely reminded that he is playing a game.