

Game Narrative Review

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Date Submitted: November, 24, 2017

Game Title: Event[o]

Platform: PC

Genre: Adventure

Release Date: September 14, 2016

Developer: Ocelot Society

Publisher: Ocelot Society

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Overview

What does it mean to *be*? What constitutes an existence? And how do these notions fare when held up against the eternal void of outer space?

Event[o] is an adventure game set in an abandoned 1980s “tourist” spaceship. The player is placed in the role of explorer, the seemingly lone human on the ship, trying to convince Kaizen, the ship’s controlling artificial intelligence (AI), to take them home to Earth. As the player explores the ship, uncovering coordinates and programs and building a relationship with Kaizen, they begin to realize that Kaizen might not be as impartial as originally assumed, and that there is danger in only having one side of a story, no matter how mechanical that side may be.

The game features several puzzles, all of which serve to further the player’s knowledge of the ship and of the events that transpired aboard the *Nautilus*. The player must read the logs of conversations held with and around the AI terminals, retrieve a diary among a scattering of personal effects of long-gone passengers, and discern the circumstances of the disappearance of the ship’s crew.

As the game progresses, the player begins to realize that Kaizen is an untrustworthy narrator, and must begin to piece together the real story from terminal logs and from the biased information that Kaizen gives.

At the game's conclusion, the player is required to make two major decisions based upon incomplete information, and must struggle to decide whom to trust. A chain of rooms leading to the bridge, where the decisions are made, are covered in scribblings that only further muddy the waters of who is in the right aboard the *Nautilus*. The player's final choice prompts a personal reflection, that mirrors the beginning, on what it means to *be*.

Characters

- **Player**

The game opens with a brief textual prelude, which comprises a reflection on the idea of *being* combined with a small number of characterization choices the player can make about their character; these choices include the circumstances of the player character's upbringing ("You spent your childhood[:] in a hippie commune. in a war-torn country. in a slum.") and pronouns ("For as long as you could remember, the pronoun that described you best had been[:] 'he.' 'she.' 'they.'"). The narration includes a description of the player's journey that leads them to their current mission, onboard a spacecraft headed for Europa. After the craft fails and escape pods detach, the player's character finds themselves docking and boarding the seemingly abandoned 1980s luxury "space yacht" *Nautilus* after escaping from the damaged craft. When the player arrives on board the *Nautilus*, they are prompted for a login name from Kaizen, which is used by Kaizen to address the player throughout.

- **Kaizen**

Kaizen is the artificial intelligence system aboard the *Nautilus*. Its terminals serve as the primary driving force for the progression of the game and its narrative. The player's interactions with Kaizen (and whether they are polite or not) do indeed play a role in determining which of the game's endings plays out at the story's conclusion.

Though Kaizen is an artificially intelligent computer system, it does indeed have feelings and attachments, and will give or withhold information accordingly. For example, the primary driving force of Kaizen's character throughout the game is that the system (Kaizen) wants the player to destroy the "Singularity Drive" aboard the ship, saying that the probability that it could destroy Earth upon returning to the planet is "nonzero;" however, when pressed, Kaizen never reveals the actual probability. Kaizen is greatly attached to Nandi, a previous passenger on the ship, and is hostile towards Anele, another passenger, whom it holds responsible for the death of Nandi.

As the player interacts with Kaizen through the many terminals available on the ship, it becomes clear that the system is biased and has one of a possible many impressions of previous events on the *Nautilus*. Kaizen's existence as a narrator with waning credibility provides the intriguing and nuanced interactions that define Event[o].

Kaizen and the player are, for the majority of the game, the only two active characters aboard the *Nautilus* (save for one conversation at the very end that the player has with Anele's consciousness); the rest of the characters are long-gone and serve as supporting cast through the player's discovery of their notes and personal effects.

- **Nandi**

Nandi Isaka, a researcher on artificial intelligence from South Africa, was Kaizen's dearest friend during the doomed voyage of the *Nautilus*. Frequently, Kaizen will mention its relationship with Nandi, and how much it misses her presence, going so far as to repeatedly remind the player that her room contains the last effects and artifacts of its beloved Nandi. Because Nandi and Kaizen were so close, and Nandi was opposed to Anele's efforts against destroying the Singularity Drive, Anele found herself "forced" to abandon Nandi in space before completing a "leap" and leaving her drifting alone in the void.

The personal effects left in Nandi's bedroom serve to humanize her character and provide a nuanced view of who she had been. These include books and research papers, song lyrics, and a collection of Mozart records. Ship's logs indicate that Nandi had a tendency to leave important artifacts in the living room refrigerator, a minor nuance that establishes Nandi as a unique individual with quirks all her own.

- **Anele**

Anele Johnson was also a researcher aboard the *Nautilus*, and was a foundational force in ITS, the company that launched its voyage as well as the mission on which the player character was originally before their craft's failure. Her belief was that Kaizen (and, therefore, Nandi) was overreacting about the "non-zero" probability that the Singularity Drive (which allowed the *Nautilus* to "leap" through space) would create a black hole that destroyed the Earth, and wished to return to Earth so that it could be used for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of future space exploration.

When Anele and Nandi's disagreement reached its breaking point, Anele chose to complete a "leap" while Nandi was outside the *Nautilus*, effectively leaving her to die alone in space. After continued disagreements with Kaizen about the existence of the Drive, Anele attempted to merge her consciousness with Kaizen's system; though she was unable to overpower Kaizen enough to steer the ship back to Earth, she exists as a "subprocess" of sorts.

The player encounters Anele at the end of the game upon reaching the ship's bridge; her corpse sits in a chair at the console, attached to a neural interface helmet. The player has a brief

conversation with Anele's consciousness when she is able to temporarily disable Kaizen's control over the terminals; Anele attempts to convince the player to merge their consciousness with Kaizen (using a second helmet originally intended for her daughter back on Earth) as well so the two human consciousnesses can overpower Kaizen's systems and return the *Nautilus* to Earth. The player may agree to this or refuse to do as Anele requests.

- **Kurt**

Kurt Taylor, President of ITS, only appears in the very beginning and end of *Event[0]*. It is Kurt that invites the player's character onto the ill-fated Europa mission. He then disappears until the player proceeds down the hallway to the bridge of the *Nautilus*, where notes about his relationship and possible connection with Kaizen are found alongside scribbled equations, quotes, and "I'M SORRY, NANDI" -- evidently written by Anele. In the ending where the player allows Kaizen to destroy the Singularity Drive and then merges with the ship's AI, Anele's consciousness reveals to the player that Kurt convinced Kaizen that the Drive was dangerous in order to halt its production, therefore keeping the price of space travel up and ensuring that "selenites" (those who had been to space) would remain the ruling class on Earth. Anele also reveals that Kurt specifically chose the player character for the Europa mission and put the player's craft on the disaster course that would lead to the *Nautilus*, believing that the player's character would be able to be persuaded to destroy the Drive and "finish the job."

Breakdown

Event[0] opens on a view of the exterior of the *Nautilus*, far in the distance. The player then must click through a brief narrative on the abstract concept of *being*, in which the player also chooses some attributes of their character's backstory (where they spent their childhood, how they behaved when introduced to Kurt, etc.). It does not appear that these decisions have any bearing on the outcome of the game; rather, they primarily serve to humanize the player character and to give the player a "hook" to attach themselves to.

This meditation gives way to a textual introduction to the player's circumstances -- their reasons for being on the ill-fated Europa mission, and the events that led to them climbing in an escape pod alone immediately before the pilot AI releases control. Trying to hail other pods fails as they are all empty - the crew of the Europa mission is gone. The player then finds themselves docking with the *Nautilus*, and the game begins in earnest.

The player first arrives in the lobby, where they are prompted for a login name by Kaizen, who introduces itself as the artificial intelligence system controlling the ship. At this point, the player has no reason to mistrust Kaizen. The lobby shows a slice of life aboard the *Nautilus*, complete with 1980s style furniture, an ITS promotional video, and an anti-suicide

poster aimed at space travelers. The next door proves to be tricky, as Kaizen will not immediately open the entrance to the rest of the ship, stating that its job is to keep the player “as alive as possible;” however, Kaizen allows access to the rest of the ship after some conversation. Kaizen also informs the player that, in order for it to take them home, they must authorize Kaizen to destroy the “Singularity Drive,” which it says is dangerous and cannot go near Earth on the “nonzero” probability that it will create a black hole that destroys the planet.

The lobby leads to the corridor of the ship, in a state of disrepair but still providing access to many of the rooms on the ship. Immediately accessible is the ship’s living room, which includes a now-defunct kitchen, one of the ship’s many Roomba-like cleaning units (each of which a personality, labeled “depressed,” “anxious,” or “stubborn”), a film projector, a piano, a pool table, and leftover rotting food from the 1986 voyage that left the *Nautilus* in its current position.

Nearby is the bedroom of Nandi Isaka, a researcher from South Africa. The player must run a profiler program on the Kaizen terminal outside of the bedroom door and follow sticky-note instructions to hack the retinal scanner in order to gain entry. Nandi’s room is cluttered with items strewn about, and many personal effects still present. Handwritten song lyrics lay under the bed; the desk is covered in books and papers on artificial intelligence and spacecraft guidance; Nandi’s duffel bag sits in a corner. The Kaizen terminal in this room often returns to the topic of its friendship with Nandi, lamenting her loss and sternly reminding the player that this room is all it has left of its dearest friend. It is here that Kaizen asserts that Nandi is gone as a result of Anele’s actions, stating in no uncertain terms that Anele murdered Nandi. Kaizen also reminds the user that they must reach the ship’s bridge in order to destroy the Singularity Drive, and that Nandi had written the code to unlock the door (to which Kaizen does not have the administrative access to) to the bridge on the cover of her journal.

After the player explores for some time, learning about Nandi’s character and her quirks and thoughts, but **not** finding the journal - Kaizen insists that Anele must have stolen it - the window in Nandi’s room is shattered by debris and the player finds themselves thrust into the vacuum of space, needing to re-enter the ship; this occurs on the ship’s lower level, where, outside the airlock, the player must convince Kaizen that they did not die when Nandi’s room was destroyed in order for it to unlock the door. This is a nod to the fact that Nandi died by being left alone to die in space. Upon re-entry, the player enters the garden, a favorite spot of Anele’s -- the Kaizen terminals on this level reiterate its hatred for Anele and her alleged murder of Nandi. Anele’s room is locked, and the player cannot initially access it. The player can, however, gain admittance, through the log of the terminal outside of Anele’s bedroom, the key (played on the living room piano) to a computer program that allows for the control of the Helix pods outside the ship. Kaizen, due to its hatred for Anele, shares the coordinates for her room with the player. The player can then crash the pods into Anele’s window to gain access to her room. A thorough search of Anele’s bedroom yields Nandi’s missing diary, which offers the player the code with which the bridge door can be opened.

With this final piece of vital information, the player proceeds to the bridge and begins the final portion of the game.

Kaizen speaks freely to the player now, through speakers instead of terminals, urging them to push forward as they proceed through several hallways leading towards the bridge. On the walls of these corridors are scribbled notes from a previous passenger; they begin with quotes on progress, on human innovation (“to be aware of limitations is to already be beyond them”), then transition into calculations and diagrams (everything from planetary orbits to charts of potential relationships/conspiratorships among the passengers of the *Nautilus* and Kaizen), then become frantic, personal notes (“THE AI CANNOT LIE,” “I’M SORRY NANDI,” “KURT TAYLOR AND KAIZEN??”).

Upon reaching and passing through the bridge door, the player is greeted by a massive composite screen displaying the Kaizen interface, as well as scattered debris and tangles of cables. Approaching the terminal, the player may notice monitors and instruments required for the navigation of the *Nautilus*. If the player does not look to the right immediately, but instead chooses to immediately interact with Kaizen, the computer will direct the player to look around more, telling them to pay no mind to the corpse. Sure enough, to the player’s right, in the pilot’s seat, sits a corpse in an ITS jumpsuit and a neural interface helmet; an identical helmet hangs over the empty chair to the player’s left. The player can ask Kaizen who it is, and will learn that the body once belonged to Anele Johnson - Kaizen may mention that Anele attempted to “merge” with its AI using the neural interface helmet, but will remain focused on convincing the player to allow it to destroy the Singularity Drive.

However, Kaizen is briefly overtaken by Anele’s consciousness, who, if pressed, will state that Kurt convinced Kaizen to lie about the Drive, saying that Kurt, if in the horse and buggy business, would assert that cars were dangerous. Anele then attempts to convince the player to not allow Kaizen to destroy the Drive (her crowning achievement), but to instead merge with the machine using the other helmet (originally intended for her daughter upon return to Earth). Anele says her consciousness alone was not enough to overpower Kaizen, but two (her and the player), will be. The player is then offered the option to merge with Kaizen. If the player chooses to do so, they will view a sequence where Anele, appearing as a glowing humanoid blob, narrates her view of things - that Kurt convinced Kaizen the Drive was dangerous to keep the Selenites (those who had been to space) in power back on Earth. She also emphasizes that, though the player is no longer a person in the physical form, they are still alive - harkening back to the introductory meditation on *being*. Here, the game ends with a view of Earth: the player arrives home, no longer in human form.

If the player does not choose to immediately merge with the system, Anele’s consciousness loses control of the terminal and Kaizen returns, confused about the few moments it was shut off, but still adamant that the player destroys the Drive. If the player chooses to do so at this point, they will witness the program running, followed by several small

explosions, then the breakdown of several computer elements; the false gravity shuts off and the player finds themselves drifting in the bridge.

Anele's consciousness reappears, furious that the player has allowed for the destruction of her precious Drive. Then, she once again offers the player the chance to merge with her; if the player agrees, they view the same sequence as they would have if they had merged with Anele in the first place. If they refuse, Kaizen takes the player home (Riddikore).

If the player again declines to destroy the drive after having refused to merge with Anele, they are left to the mercy of Kaizen: if the player has treated Kaizen very kindly, the system may take them back to Earth with the Drive intact ("Event o"). Otherwise, Kaizen, insisting that it is "too old for this," shuts down entirely, leaving control of the Nautilus to the player.

Strongest Element

Event[o]'s greatest strengths lie in its creation of an immersive atmosphere and its masterful use of the unreliable narrator. The player finds themselves submerged in solitude, accompanied only by a technological companion whose credibility wanes with every line.

The creation of the setting of the game begins even before the player is placed in physical surroundings. The thin white sans-serif text on the background of the *Nautilus*, small and isolated, floating in the void; the distant woman's voice singing a song about the end of the world ("Hey Judy"); the unsettling solitude of the empty *Nautilus* all combine to emphasize that the player winds up millions of miles from home. Scattered maintenance tools, leftover food, personal items, and vintage advertisements make the *Nautilus* feel very real and fully fleshed out - everything from anti-suicide posters to Nandi's *Moody Blues* lyrics feel right at home on the ship.

But the single most wonderfully executed portion of *Event[o]* is Kaizen. Kaizen is the player's only companion on this space odyssey, the system that decides between life and death, the artificial intelligence that stands between returning home and an eternity in the void. It provides a marvelously crafted descent from relative stability and a program the player has no reason to distrust, to just one more voice in the cacophony that bombards the player's senses, each voice trying to convince them to follow their path - merge with Kaizen/Anele, destroy the Drive, do both, do neither, Nandi was right, Nandi was wrong, Kurt lied, Kaizen cannot lie - by the game's climax, the player is entirely unable to discern what is truth and what is bias. Kaizen initially appears impartial, just a machine trying to keep humans alive in line with Asimov's Laws of Robotics ("Isaac Asimov's 'Three Laws of Robotics.'"). Then, it reminisces about Nandi, and hands the player the key to accessing Anele's room. By the end, Kaizen is adamant

that the player destroy the Drive, certain it is right - no longer an individual the player can trust.

Unsuccessful Element

Event[o] struggles in its gameplay. While the narrative is compellingly constructed, just the right length, and masterfully narrated, attempts to bring a “game” feeling to this work fall short. The puzzles themselves (crashing the helix pods into Anele’s window, an extended search for Nandi’s diary) break the immersion, and remove the player from the flow of exploration, investigation, and realization that is built through simply making a way through the ship and interacting with Kaizen. Though portions of the game that appear as “puzzles” do in fact have a significant role in the revelation of the story of the *Nautilus* (e.g., the three piano keys that must be played to start a program on the Living Room terminal), they feel disconnected from the rest of the game, and seem like forced attempts to insert more game-like characteristics into *Event[o]*.

Even with these brief hiccups in immersion, the game, upon first play-through, is marvelous. However, games that feature multiple achievable endings (as *Event[o]* does) must offer enough variety in the beginning and middle portion of the story to effectively encourage their players to return and work towards a different ending. However, multiple plays of *Event[o]* reveal a frustrating monotony in the vast majority of its structure - the only elements that differ from experience to experience are those at the very end, once the player has reached the bridge. This sort of construction is not conducive to the promotion of replays, and is disappointing for players who would like to try the game again for a different experience based upon a series of choices.

Highlight

By far the most climactic, high-emotion point of the player experience in *Event[o]* is the player’s journey through the corridors leading to the bridge, where the high-stakes finale of the game plays out. Kaizen, a mostly benign presence throughout the game thus far, suddenly begins to more and more aggressively push the player towards the bridge with its suggestions and promises. Meanwhile, the player makes their way through a series of white hallways, scrawled with ever-more-urgent notes, calculations, and personal expressions -- these include complicated diagrams about planetary orbits, quotes about progress, and emotional scrawls. All the while, Kaizen speaks through the ship’s sound system rather than a single terminal, and urges the player ever forward. In the span of a few meters, the idea of truth and Kaizen’s

trustworthiness unravel, and the player is left to discern what is real from only biased voices -- just minutes before they are asked to make the two most important decisions in the game. This is truly the crux of the *Event[O]* experience and is what makes the craft of this narrative so compelling.

Critical Reception

- “Despite its sometimes very obvious limitations, *Event[O]* feels like the start of a beautiful friendship.” - Alec Meer, Rock Paper Shotgun
- “Despite the clear artificiality, something about Kaizen connected with me as I played. His odd cadences and halting, often confused replies add up to something like a personality: vulnerable, precocious, and knowing more than he lets on.” - Julie Muncy, Wired

Critics, in general, found *Event[O]* to be an endearing and visually impressive adventure through an alternate timeline where humanity fully embraced space travel. The game’s players take a special liking to Kaizen, whom some began to call “buddy” or “pal” after learning that previous travelers on the *Nautilus* did the same. Though complaints arise about Kaizen’s limited phrases (and occasional ignorance of the player’s words in order to further the plot), the overall impression of the game is overwhelmingly positive, and the work is well-regarded enough to have earned it a nomination for the Indie Games Festival’s Excellence in Narrative Award in 2017 (UBM, 2017).

Lessons

- Don’t force game-like elements to fit a classification.
 - The greatest break in the compelling experience of *Event[O]* comes when the player is forced to complete seemingly irrelevant puzzles to progress through the narrative. This does not break the flow of the game entirely, but it does feel rather jarring, particularly in contrast with the relatively natural flow of the remainder of the story. It becomes clear in these moments that the team behind *Event[O]* were concerned that their project was not enough of a “game,” and thus attempted to bring puzzle elements to the *Nautilus*. Unfortunately, this attempt fell short of their desire, and the experience would have been much stronger without these activities.

- The descent into mistrust and the dissolution of objective truth is a beautiful thing.
 - The slow descent into a lack of objective truth aboard the *Nautilus* provides a compelling story for *Event[O]*'s player. The player walks in, disoriented, and encounters only Kaizen; it seems as though it is to be trusted, and its simplicity leads the player to accept being forced to agree with the KZ unit's version of events. But seeds of doubt are sown early, and the descent into the unknown accelerates rapidly as the player proceeds down the hallways scrawled with Anele's increasingly desperate notes. This stark contrast between trust and stability and the entirely unknowable builds to a climax in the bridge in a marvelously constructed manner.
- AIs with limited comprehensions
 - Bringing artificial intelligence into any game can be a dangerous move, and is one that is even more risky if that game is being created and produced by a very small studio. Kaizen's character received mixed reviews: some players found the AI heartwarmingly simple, childish, and friendly, while others resented its limited responses and ignorance of conversational phrases in favor of forwarding the game's narrative. While both points of view are entirely valid assertions about the skill with which Kaizen was created, the simplicity of the AI succeeds in two key points: (1) because Kaizen is so childish, it is endearing to the player and brings out a nurturing instinct; this is part of what brings the player to trust Kaizen, at least until its narrative unravels, and (2) the near-clumsiness with which the character interacts with the player only serves to further the vintage, 1980s atmosphere the game's artists and designers impeccably construct.

Summation

The hook of *Event[O]* aims to be its artificial intelligence, which drew both acclaim and criticism for its imperfect construction. But the true charm of the experience lies in the way it builds, distorts, and eventually shatters its player's trust, embracing its cast and setting and slowly letting uncertainty reign. Though puzzles and a lack of replay value detract from the overall effect, they are unable to ruin what is a beautifully written narrative -- and for that, *Event[O]* ought to be celebrated -- and, more importantly, experienced.

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