Immersive Game Design: Indigo Prophecy

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Whenever I speak with various friends or coworkers about playing Indigo Prophecy, they inevitably bring up one or more of the following points: the gripping introductory scene, how the great story turned into a complete train wreck during the second half of the game, or the interactive sex scene that was removed from the United States and Canadian releases. While all of these points are valid and understandable, I think that the often-discussed narrative content is not the most remarkable facet of the game. The innovative game systems and mechanics that succeed in enhancing the immersive nature of the experience strike me as the most noteworthy and interesting aspects of the game. I feel that these systems are elegant and bold examples of great game design that are as inspiring as they are effective.

Through a detailed analysis of these systems I hope to bring the concept of immersive game design to the forefront of other developer's minds and promote the discussion of systems specifically built to heighten player immersion. Moreover, by identifying the central components of these systems I hope to give fellow developer's additional "tools" they can use to enhance the immersive nature of their own games. Finally, I want to inspire others, as I have been inspired, to push boundaries and create new immersive systems of their own.

Background Information

Although Indigo Prophecy closely resembles an adventure game, David Cage, the director, lead designer, and writer for the game calls it an interactive drama or interactive story due to how it uniquely presents an interactive narrative. Despite the inherent difficulty marketing this unique game, Atari published the game internationally in September 2005 for the Playstation 2 (PS2), Xbox, and PC in six different languages. It was released as Fahrenheit throughout the world but the name was changed to Indigo Prophecy in the United States and Canada to avoid confusion with the film Fahrenheit 9/11. It has sold over 800,000 copies worldwide and all versions of the game have a favorable Metacritic score between 83 and 85. Although the game was simultaneously developed for all three platforms, the PS2 game was identified as the lead version and the primary control scheme was designed for dual analog stick controllers. I will reference this control scheme throughout the analysis

despite playing the Xbox version of the game on an Xbox 360 since both versions utilize the same control scheme.

The game is broken into 44 scenes and the player controls between one and five characters per scene. The player controls three main characters throughout the majority of the game and two minor characters at specific points in the narrative. After the player finishes a scene with one character, they are brought back to the character select screen to choose another character. When all character stories for a scene are completed, a new scene begins.

The game is set in modern-day New York City and even though the overall tone and content of the story is tied to the real-world, it contains supernatural elements and futuristic concepts. The main character in the game, Lucas Kane, is a 31-year-old IT Manager thrust into a fight between powerful secret societies. They are fighting for control over a girl who is connected to an ancient Mayan prophecy concerning a secret that could save or destroy the world. The other two main characters, Carla Valenti and Tyler Miles, work for the New York Police Department and are investigating a series of brutal murders that were recently committed in the city. The overall feel of the game's narrative is very cinematic and it immediately plunges the player into an extreme situation with one of the best interactive, introductory experiences ever created.

The game begins as Kane discusses, via voiceover, how his life is about to change and become drastically worse. The camera cinematically travels through NYC and eventually zooms into the restroom of a restaurant where the player witnesses Kane stab a person to death while under the control of an external, supernatural force. After witnessing this murder, which is also the most violent and bloody scene in the entire game, the player takes control of a bewildered Kane and attempts to clean the murder scene and exit the restroom before a police officer catches him near the body. Although the content of this introductory scene is important, I am interested in analyzing how it is delivered to the player, as the holistic manner in which Indigo Prophecy is designed stands as a shining example of how a user interface and visual style can meaningfully support and enhance gameplay.

Consider the Frame

Characteristically, most videogames artistically and interactively differentiate between navigating within the "frame" of a game, (menu system, tutorials, unlocking bonus content, etc.) and the game-world. DVDs usually employ a similar differentiation between the frame (menu system) and watching the movie itself. Although this differentiation

compartmentalizes all of the content contained in a videogame for easy navigation, it breaks the immersive nature of the experience. The complete separation between frame and primary content is a fascinating design problem that few games have attempted to address. I believe that Indigo Prophecy is one of the few games to successfully connect its frame with its game-world and the tutorial that is hosted by an in-game, 3D representation of Cage showcases this connection quite well.

After accessing the tutorial, the player takes control of a generic mannequin dressed in a mo-cap suit on the virtual equivalent of a movie set. Cage starts the tutorial by telling the player that the game was designed to deliver a cinematic, interactive experience akin to an interactive movie and after he relates additional background information about the game's purpose, he teaches the player how to play the game. This scene feels like a behind-the-scenes segment for a movie and it helps flavor the game as a unique experience despite the forwardness of the dialogue. Although it makes the player deliberately aware they are playing a game and essentially breaks the videogame's equivalent of the fourth wall, it effectively imbues the game with a meta-narrative that enhances the entire experience. Likewise, the usually rote task of navigating menus to access entertainment content is actually transformed into a meaningful experience since the rest of the game's user interface also supports this meta-narrative.

Navigating menus in order to watch a movie or play a game is usually a purely utilitarian task where the user is consciously aware that they are completing tasks to access entertainment content. Once they access the content, they will hopefully become fully engaged with the game or movie. Indigo Prophecy makes the utilitarian task of navigating menus and learning how to play the game meaningful by encapsulating it within the relatable, established framework of watching a movie. It adds layers of meaning to the experience that makes it, as a consequence, feel more robust and engaging.

For instance, when the game is paused, the buttons to unpause or quit are labeled "Play" and "Stop" and they are paired with the corresponding images, a triangle and square, which are commonly associated with those cinematic actions. Additionally, the chapters of the game are called scenes and the background of the main menu continuously transitions between television sets that play video clips taken from the game. Moreover, the entire game is presented in letterbox format and it makes liberal use of cinematic camera angles and tracking shots.

All of these elements create a wonderful and meaningful frame for the videogame. This frame supports and enhances the player experience much like a frame on a traditional painting adds to the aesthetics and supports the meaning of the piece. Although, the frame for a piece of artwork is often aesthetically differentiated from the art itself, Indigo Prophecy takes it one step further by interactively differentiating between the two. The primary buttons on the controller are used to make selections in the menu screens whereas, in the game, the player makes selections by moving the right analog stick in a variety of ways that closely represent the character's in-game actions. This connection between player action and in-game character action is a powerful mechanic for increasing player immersion and it, much like the game's thematic framing, pervades the entire experience.

Meaningful Motion

In-game character actions are usually controlled with the dual analog sticks and, rarely, the left and right triggers. Players control the movement of characters with the left analog stick and use the right analog stick to complete certain actions. The majority of these actions simulate real-world activities like opening doors, drinking from a glass, climbing, etc. and players are free to engage in a wide variety of these actions throughout the game. While it is noteworthy that characters can complete a large number of actions in the game and many of these actions have little influence over the progression of the story, a character's virtual actions and the physical similarities to the player's real-world actions fundamentally make the game a more immersive experience.

Through the use of simple gestures like quarter turns or moving to the left or the right with the analog stick, the game creates a deeper connection between the character's in-game actions and the real-world actions of the player playing the game. Although the player's motions are still abstractions of the in-game actions they invoke, the deeper connection formed between them is surprisingly powerful.

For example, opening a door requires a movement forward while closing a door requires a movement backwards. Climbing up a chain link fence requires the alternating motions of a quarter turn left and up to simulate a left hand climbing-motion and a quarter turn right and up to simulate the right hand climbing-motion. In order to clean a floor with a mop, the player must repeatedly move the analog stick from the right to the left. Moreover, if a player fails, or only completes part of the action, the character will actually go through part of the corresponding animation and then smoothly return to a neutral position. This granular,

immediate connection between player action and character action breathes additional life into the game and, in turn, supports the connection between the player and the in-game characters and their stories. Moreover, the on-screen visualization of these actions represent a relatively simple but extremely effective feedback system that further supports the connection between player action and character action while ensuring that players always know what actions they can perform.

All potential game actions are represented in a clear, consistent manner within the top black border of the screen. The movement, the name of the action, and an icon representing the action are displayed whenever the player is located near an actionable object or location. The continuous movement of a soft pulsing dot located within a circle mimics the motion the player needs to make whereas the player controls a red dot that appears within the circle whenever they move the right analog stick. The player is simply tasked with following the motion of the soft pulsing dot at a reasonable speed. It is a clean, easily understood input system that makes this central mechanic amazingly straightforward. These action-prompts appear during segments of gameplay where the player is given a certain amount of time to find clues, solve puzzles, or just "live" in the game-world. However, they are also used during conversations with other characters in a more constrained but equally believable manner.

When players are conversing with other characters in the game and it is their turn to respond or ask a question, they are given between two and four one-word topics to select using the mechanic I described above. However, the players have a limited amount of time to make their selection and the topic selected can dramatically change the conversation.

Giving the player a limited amount of time to select a response further reinforces the believability of the virtual world and its strong connection to reality. This narrative mechanic makes the flow of dialogue feel natural and does not allow players to revisit conversations or pause before replying for an indefinite amount of time like many dialogue-heavy RPGs. This innovative conversation system not only makes the story move at a quicker pace but it also gives the player less time to doubt their decisions. Subsequently, they are more engrossed in the story and less likely to try and reload the previous save just to see what would happen if they chose a different topic. It is a great system that I wish more dialogue-heavy games would employ and, thankfully, the timed elements of this system are also utilized in the game's interactive action sequences.

Interactive Action

Indigo Prophecy contains many different action-oriented scenes that resemble the high-intensity portions of an action movie. Cage has developed a number of different game systems that give the player the ability to control characters as they perform a wide variety of moves and animations in quick succession. Each of these systems resembles some type of new or polished Quick Time Event (QTE). In a traditional QTE, the player is prompted to interact with the controller in some manner within a specific frame of time. For instance, a player might be prompted to press the down button in less than four seconds by a flashing down arrow that suddenly appears on the screen. Traditionally, if they fail, the player's character dies and they are forced to restart the game at an earlier point in time. If they succeed, they will continue to progress through the game. Indigo Prophecy's QTEs feel more meaningful since they are specifically designed to maintain immersion and keep the player focused on important game content.

For example, during action sequences where the character is struggling against a strong physical force like a heavy wind or lifting weights the player must tap the left and right triggers in an alternating fashion as quickly as possible to reach a certain intensity threshold by the end of a specified time interval. In other sections, the player has to balance some aspect of the game like regulating the character's respiratory rate as they fight against claustrophobic thoughts or maintaining a character's balance as they walk on a thin, suspended beam. In these sequences, the player must tap the left and right triggers to keep a vertical line close to the center of a meter as it constantly moves back and forth between the extreme ends of this meter. In both cases, these examples are challenges characters face in the game and their corresponding virtual actions feel well represented by the different forms of player input each requires. In fact, like the characters' physical and emotional state, I felt physically tired and a little scared while trying to accomplish these goals. I believe this is an amazing achievement since the player's actions with a controller represented the actions of the character they were controlling and their physical state in the real-world mirrored the character's physical state in the game-world.

While the second type of QTE takes place over a much larger portion of time, it manages to effectively present narrative conflict in a unique format. In these sequences, the player is caught in a situation where they must accomplish some goal before an incoming, inexorable force stops game progression by killing the player, throwing them in jail, or

initiating a similar game-ending event. For instance, a couple hours into the game, the player must help Kane find information relating to the supernatural events that surround his life and escape before police officers arrive at the house. The player is given the freedom to complete a wide range of activities before two police officers walk into the house where he is located and eventually take him to jail. If the player does not find the information and flee the scene before the police officers arrive, the story will end.

When the police officers receive a call from the dispatcher to investigate the house where Kane is located, the game transitions from focusing solely on Kane's actions to a split-screen presentation that depicts both Kane's actions and the police officers' actions as they drive through the city and start investigating the house. At the top of the screen, a fuse starts to burn down, notifying the player when the officers will enter the house. This is a great example of game design and storytelling working together in a supportive manner. The player is put in a position where he needs to get something done in a short amount of time but unlike most games that simply tell the player to complete a task because "something" will happen off-screen or time will run out, Indigo Prophecy simultaneously shows the player's actions and the actions that this game-ending force is taking in real-time. It raises the player's level of engagement within the game-world through escalating tension and it immerses the player through cinematic storytelling and the illusion of a cohesive virtual world that is bigger than the player's localized interactive gamespaces.

Indigo Prophecy's most complicated action sequences are controlled via a more traditional QTE system that replaces timed button presses with the timed movements of both analog sticks. Overlaid on the action in the center of the screen are two half-transparent wheels broken into four colored segments that correspond with the four cardinal directions (these wheels resemble two small Simon Says game boards). Different sections of the two wheels light up in a specific order during action set pieces like when Tyler is playing basketball against a coworker or Kane is fighting the main antagonist of the game. The player is tasked with quickly moving the analog sticks in the correct direction and order indicated by the lit sections of the two wheels. This system allows the player to control a wide variety of rapid movements with one central input system that loosely corresponds to the action on the screen.

Although there is a connection with the direction a player moves the analogs sticks and the corresponding on-screen action, this connection is

less precise than other modes of interaction. This system is able to better represent the undulating flow of these action sequences through modulating the speed and complexity of the movements the player is asked to complete. The positioning and integration of the wheels with the action on the screen helps the player both follow the action while simultaneously understand the inputs they need to make. While the system is not perfect, it employs QTEs that are more relevant, useful, and less frustrating for both casual and hardcore gamers than traditional QTEs used in different videogames. This interactive system is also used during some important conversations that highlight Indigo Prophecy's unique narrative structure.

Bending Stories

Rather than use traditional, linear or branching storytelling methodologies in Indigo Prophecy, Cage invented a branching storytelling system that allows the player to "bend the story" through acquiring or failing to acquire optional information concerning the game's narrative. The potential for players to obtain this optional information effectively personalizes their experience while maintaining the central pacing and story structure of the core narrative. This storytelling technique is used during conversation segments that prompt the player to engage in a QTE, as described above, using both analog sticks. Success or failure during these sections will not stop the progression of the game or necessarily end the character's story. If the player misses a few prompts, instead of showing the player a Game Over screen or taking a "life", the conversation simply changes direction against the character's wishes or ends abruptly. If the player succeeds, they are rewarded with additional information about a character or an event, often through internal monologue. I think this is an effective mechanic as it allows the player to supplement the story with additional insights and information through successful gameplay without hindering their progression if they fail. It is also a noteworthy technique as it emphasizes the importance of the story by utilizing it as a reward for skilled play. This mechanic makes the story a more prominent and valuable element of the game and, thus, it is better positioned to engage and immerse the player.

This concept of bending stories is realized through other gameplay mechanics as well. Players uncover different layers of detail related to certain aspects of the story based upon the dialogue choices they make during normal conversations. Moreover, there are often a number of contextual actions the player can take in various environments that are non-essential to story progression. These choices and environmental

interactions have even greater significance as they raise or lower the character's Mental Health: an immersive mechanic that is a meaningful evolution of the traditional health bar found in many videogames.

Health Bar Evolved

Throughout the game, Kane copes with a variety of issues that cause him to question his sanity. His Mental Health is represented by a meter that is displayed in one of the lower corners of the screen whenever the player takes an action that changes Kane's mood or mental state. If Kane's Mental Health is completely depleted, the story ends as he commits suicide or turns himself into the police. This Mental Health meter is a meaningful evolution of the classic health bar system as it represents a realistic resource that supports the story and themes of the game.

The traditional health bar abstractly represents how much physical damage a character can take before they die. The implementation of this general concept has taken many forms in different games. However, in a cerebral, realistic game like Indigo Prophecy where fighting or physical violence is not a consistent focus, using this type of health bar makes little sense. By redesigning the health bar to focus on the mental state of the characters, the game implicitly supports both the believability of the game-world and the connection the player feels in regards to the character's state of mind.

Throughout the entire game, the player is controlling characters that live in a realistic representation of New York City that includes some supernatural and fantastic elements. The script, animation, and voice acting help create realistic representations of people as they act surprised and scared at the appropriate moments when confronting strange creatures and situations. Mental Health supports these game elements by giving the player an ever-present, clear, empirical gauge of the character's mental state. As this gauge moves up and down in accordance with certain character actions, these actions gain increased significance because they are believably tied to the changes in a character's Mental Health. For example, washing a character's face or playing guitar will calm them down and increase their Mental Health while getting in an argument with an ex-girlfriend or watching a news broadcast about a murder a character committed will lower their Mental Health. This believable connection between action, Mental Health, and a character's reaction creates a game-world filled with engaging realistic characters.

In fact, Cage did not originally plan to implement this mechanic into the game. However, after playtesting the game without it, he noticed that the players didn't care about the characters as much as he

anticipated. This was due to the fact that many of the actions the characters can take are relatively mundane tasks like drinking a glass of water, reading a book, or going to sleep and, due to their normalcy, the positive or negative effects they had on the characters' mental state was not completely clear.

This mechanic is necessary to the experience because it helps players become more invested in the lives of the characters and it makes them feel more realistic. Moreover, Mental Health is a fantastic game design mechanic that takes a traditionally abstract mechanic and fits it into the context of the game in a meaningful manner.

An Imperfect Prophecy

Indigo Prophecy is far from perfect and while I will not dwell on all of the problems in the game, I think that it is worthwhile to mention, within the scope and focus of this paper, some of the game's biggest flaws.

The story, as previously mentioned, is truly gripping and intriguing until the second half of the game which begins after Kane is killed and comes back to life. I think that this situation is too strange for most people to believe and it marks a point in the narrative where too many outlandish concepts and characters are introduced and never sufficiently integrated into the story. Some bizarre highlights include when a new antagonist is introduced as some type of sentient robot composed of artificial intelligences from "the Net", Kane and Carla end up falling in love and having sex even though Kane is still technically dead, and a group of bums is revealed to be the "Invisibles" who monitor all of the other societies who secretly rule the world.

It seems like Quantic Dream spent most of their time developing the first half of the game and had to rush through the final half, cutting a fair amount of content to meet development deadlines. Although this belief is pure speculation, Cage has said in interviews that the Mental Health system was integrated late into the game's development cycle and I believe this negatively influenced its effectiveness in
the game.

Part of the problem with the Mental Health system is that it is only effective when the player is controlling Kane. The Mental Health meter is present when the player is controlling the other two main characters but it never truly affects game progression. This limited the different types of gameplay supported by the other characters and I believe this made those characters less engaging and less fun to play.

The action-oriented QTE system, while effective, was not perfect and sometimes I found it difficult to watch the action on the screen while I

was trying to concentrate on inputting the correct commands at the right times. Moreover, players have a set number of "lives" they are allowed to use if they fail a QTE. If they lose all of their "lives" they need to re-start from their last save or from the beginning of the scene. The whole concept of "lives" in a game that works so hard to connect the game-world to the real-world feels extremely out of place and incongruous with the rest of the game. It is a shame that they are used in the game, as they truly don't add anything meaningful to the narrative and actively detract from the immersive experience. Although they certainly helped make some parts of the game less frustrating, I believe Quantic Dream could have created a more elegant system if they had enough time.

The player actually increases their allotment of "lives" by completing certain events or picking up Talismans that are found hovering in the air at secret locations. Along with these Talismans the player can also pick up Bonus Cards that are worth a certain amount of points that the player can use to unlock bonus content in the game's main menu. Both of these pickups feel completely out of place and add absolutely nothing to the narrative. In fact, I believe that they actually make the narrative less powerful as they consistently remind the player that they are playing a videogame and this breaks the immersion the other game systems worked so hard to maintain.

A Worthwhile Experience

Despite the game's many flaws, Indigo Prophecy remains one of the most enjoyable games I have ever played. I can appreciate it on multiple levels and I love how many different aspects of the game were simultaneously innovative and successful at increasing player immersion. The game inspired me to attempt to design game systems that work in tandem with each other in a concerted effort to increase player immersion. It is an extremely difficult task but well worth the effort as the immersive nature of a game is often directly related to its ability to meaningfully affect players.

Indigo Prophecy contained some elegant, innovative, and successful systems that heightened player immersion and I encourage developers to play Indigo Prophecy or at least watch some videos of the game online to gain a better understanding of how these systems worked. Moreover, I hope this analysis inspires other developers to consider, discuss, and create game systems specifically designed to increase player immersion in their games as I certainly look forward to personally experiencing them in the future.

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