Deconstruction

Introduction

Return of the Obra Dinn is a puzzle adventure game released for Windows and macOS on October 18, 2018. The game was solely developed by Lucas Pope and his team at 3909 LLC, and it averages a 90 on OpenCritic.

Intended Audience

The intended audience of *Return of the Obra Dinn* is puzzle/adventure game lovers, first and foremost. The gameplay of the game is all about coming to logical conclusions on the various information about the crew, and there's nothing else for the player to do. The game really forces the player to think about all of the information they have in order to succeed. Another group that can be drawn in is fans of interestingly-told stories. The plot of the game is told through individual vignettes that are mostly out of order, forcing

the player to complete all vignettes and piece them together. It's a very unique way to tell the story, and it could pull many players in.

Gameplay and Experience

The gameplay of *Return of the Obra Dinn* is simple to understand, but difficult to solve. The player takes on the role of an insurance assessor in the 1800's who climbs aboard
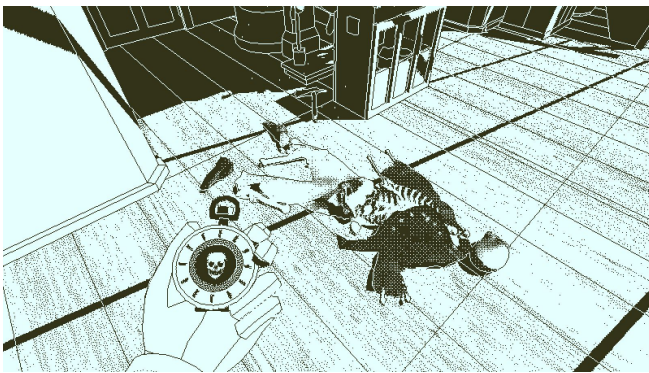
a ship that returned to port with no crew, and the player must figure out what happened to everyone aboard. To do so, the player has their mind, a log book, and a magic pocket watch. The log book holds a drawing of the entire crew, a list of all crew and some information about them, a map of the ship, a map of the ship's journey, and a lot of blank pages that will be filled out with information about each vignette that the player visits. The pocket watch allows the player to find the corpse of a crew member and enter a vignette of the last moment that person died; the player hears the last things that the person heard, and then they can walk around a moment frozen in time.

With just those two things, the player has to figure out what name lines up to each person, how specifically they died, and who or what killed them. The player has to pick apart information from every
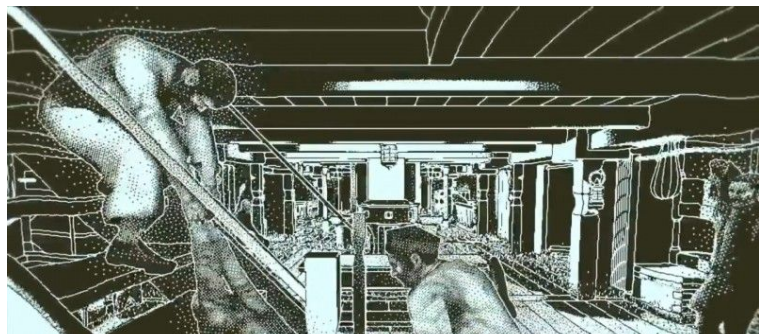
source they get to identify all 60 people and their fates. Accents, people who they're associated with, places on the ship they visit, and jobs they're seen doing all are just a few ways that can tip off the player to these things. When a player correctly identifies all of the information about 3 separate characters, the game will confirm them. This allows the player to continue progressing forward with information they know is right without allowing them to just guess or use trial and error.

The resulting experience from the target audience's perspective is a game that delivers the best video game representation of being a detective. The game puts a lot of trust in the player to be able to figure things out on their own, and what this does is gives the player the room they need to take in info, get things right, and feel smart about it. It's immensely satisfying when you fill in the information on a crew member and the game confirms three correct deductions. Not only that, but the many avenues that information is given forces the player to think outside of the box in order to learn more. Many players, including myself, used paper and pencils to keep notes about the crew as they shifted in and out of vignettes, trying to find anything they might have missed. In addition, the story's unconventional nature makes it a good driving factor for players to continue on.

Game Systems and Mechanics

Progression

As this is a puzzle adventure game, the player is going to be using logic most of the time to discover the identities of the crew. Since the intended experience is to make the player feel like a detective, the progression system of the game is what keeps players on the right track in their investigation.

Log Book

The log book is an extremely important part of the game, because it basically keeps track of the jumbled mess that the player must uncover while also leading them in the
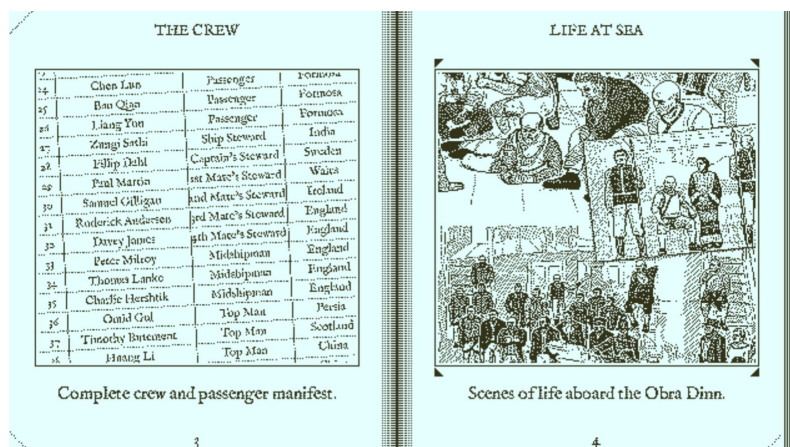
right direction. The log book includes all of the information about the crew stated in the previous section. In addition, the most basic of information about every corpse discovered is automatically filled in after witnessing a death for the first time. The player must fill in the names and causes of death in order to make progress in the game. The book allows players to have a very standardized place to store the most important of info that they discover, and this standardization nudges the player in the right direction without giving away the answer

like so many detective games accidentally do. As the log book fills up with info, the player can deductively reason other things down the line.

Memento Mortem

The pocket watch that the player uses is called the Memento Mortem. With it, they are transported back to a moment frozen in time where they must look around and pick out details in order to deduce the identity of everyone on the ship and how they died. Lucas Pope did a great job of hiding all of these things in a variety of ways. Very rarely will a character up and say a name or their relationship to someone. Instead, the player must find small things, such as tattoos, what part of the ship they sleep in, what tools they're seen with, and things of that nature that will allow them to make progress. It's these little details that make the game as satisfying as it is.

Info Confirmation

When a player correctly inputs the name and cause of death of 3 crew members, the game will play a jaunty tune and change the font of those 3 correct crew members' entries from a scribbly, handwritten font to a more official, printed one. This is the main real sense of

progression for the player, as they could be stuck forever if they had no way to know for sure if they were right. Having it confirm every single correct time would make it too
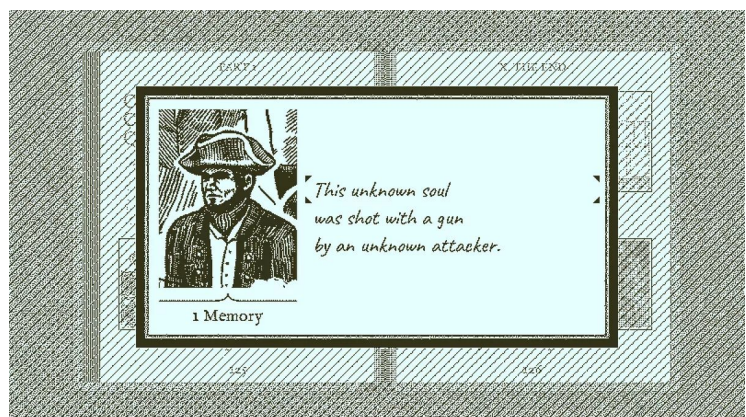
easy to guess and test, but any larger than 3 and players might be stuck for long stretches of time. Three correct deductions at a time is the perfect balance. Once information is confirmed, players can then use that to make other deductions, which really allows for a good pacing and creates a lot amazing "aha!" moments.

Plot

As stated previously, the other major player motivation is the plot. The player is not only trying to figure out the individual fates of the crew, but also why it ended up back at port empty at all.

Scattered Bodies

Throughout the game, the player must explore the empty ship as the insurance assessor and discover bodies that are strewn about in various places. Using the Memento Mortem on a body will start a chain of discovering other bodies within the same "chapter" of the story as that body. However, these chapters can be experienced completely out of order, and the bodies often have to be discovered in reverse chronological order. This unique storytelling structure keeps the mystery of the Obra Dinn alive until the very end.

Voice Acting

Every death vignette opens with a blank screen that gives subtitles for the last things that the person that died heard, before allowing the player to see the frozen death

scene. These bits of voice acting definitely are necessary for some puzzles, as they give away accents and identities that can't be shown visually. However, the voice acting also greatly enhances the story and makes every character involved in the story feel that much more alive.

Death Vignettes

Obviously, the ways that the death vignettes are set up is imperative to the game's core loop of discovering information about the crew. However, this information also doubles
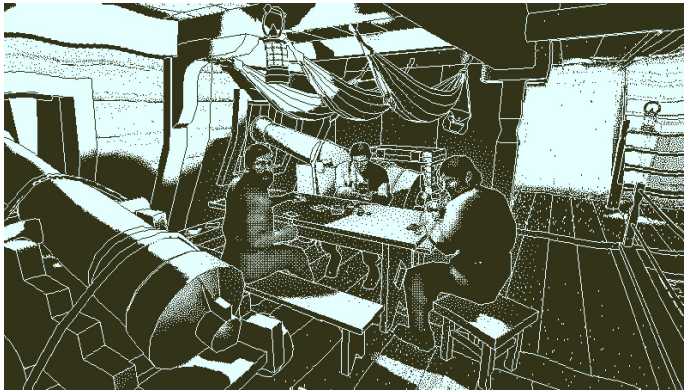
as plot and character details. Most characters are fully characterized by their actions in these vignettes, with very few having voicelines to give them depth. The second mate's steward's nervous expression around his boss says a lot about their relationship, for example. It gives the player a visual of this world that is surprisingly detailed for essentially being a couple dozen pictures.
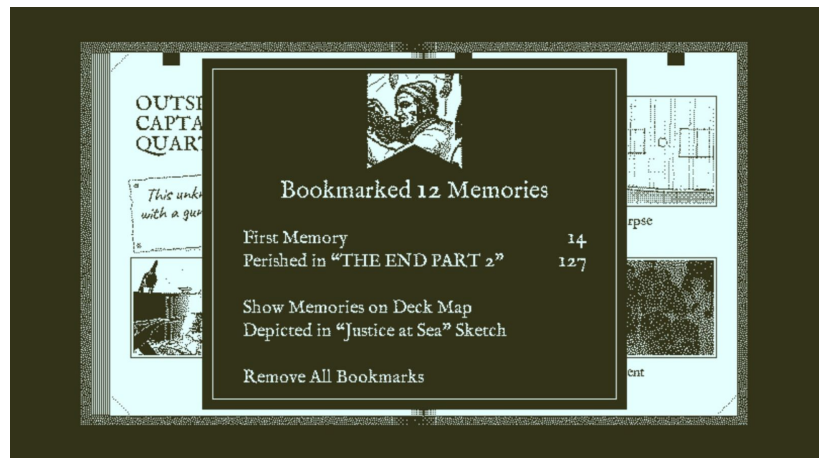
Player Experience

The systems of *Return of the Obra Dinn* interact to really enhance that feeling of adventure and discovery. This is easily one of the best detective games ever made because it trusts the player fully. It doesn't give players hints or accidentally give them the questions they should be asking; it gives players a wide variety of small pieces of information to piece together to truly challenge them, but the game never becomes

unfair. The progression system is a smart way to really make sure the player understands the game and is trying, and the plot itself is just a huge bonus to keep players engaged. There's plenty of threads for the player to follow if one is stumping them, as well, so that walkthroughs should never be necessary.

Success

Return of the Obra Dinn succeeds in all fronts. Its core gameplay systems are incredibly engaging and unique, pulling players into a surprisingly rich world. The intended experience of making the player feel smart is exceedingly met because of the smart ways it overcomes many obstacles that the detective and puzzle genres often face. It's deceptive in how deep down the rabbit hole a player can get just to figure out one person's name. The satisfaction that comes from following a character's every move, feeling like you've cracked it, putting it into the log book, and seeing the screen go dark and the words "Well done" appear on screen is one of the most satisfying feelings in puzzle games. In addition, the game tells a decent enough story in a very cool way that is fun to uncover.