

AW - Game Review

by Alex Walton

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Game Design & History (ACCA4033) - Game Review

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Abstract

In this assignment, the video game 'Beneath a Steel Sky' has been deconstructed into various categories including a brief look into general history and how the title fits into the era, the key components of the game design, the demographic that the game was produced for and if this choice was reasonable, how the user may interact with different portions of the game including gameplay and menus and key drawbacks and positives.

Leading on from this, the replay value and content was determined based on all of the findings and accompanying evidence to decide if this game is a good product.

Introduction

In this assignment, an in-depth analysis into the video game 'Beneath a Steel Sky' (1) will be conducted, thoroughly deconstructing and reviewing various categories of the game's design and how these elements determine the finished product and its impact on different genres. From the company webpage, 'Beneath a Steel Sky' is a point and click adventure that was publicly released in 1994 for PC by Revolution Software, a UK business founded in York in 1990.

A point and click adventure with 8 bit graphics, the game takes a dark turn leaning heavily into cyberpunk and sci-fi territory setting up an unfamiliar world for the user to click to progress. Further down this review, each component will be discussed in detail to determine the validity, popularity and overall success of this standalone title.

Genre

From the official webpage for the game (1), the description reads as follows:

'After being abducted by brutal soldiers and his kinfolk butchered, Robert Foster finds himself in Union City – a vast metropolis under the tyranny of a fascist AI. Alone, save for the circuit board of his best friend, Foster must discover the sinister truth – and why they specifically came for him.'

This description immediately provides major clues as to what direction the game has taken. 'Tyranny' and 'fascist AI' already highlight deep undertones of a dystopian style game while also featuring hints of adventure as eluded by the phrase 'why they specifically came for him'. The hints of the above two narrative styles already provides the player with enough information to imagine what kind of setting they will navigate through.

Furthermore, the steam marketplace listing (2) provides multiple genre tags for the game providing an initial insight into the gameplay content of the game. The most notable tags are 'point and click', 'adventure' and 'puzzle', this tells the user to expect to be able to solve challenges through the utilisation of the computer mouse which will be covered further down this review. The user also now knows to experience an expansive story in an unfamiliar world further building upon the adventure elements.

In summary of the genre, the user now has enough knowledge before beginning gameplay to expect a strong yet dark story narrated through direct but simple gameplay

Demographic

Despite both Revolution Software and the game being UK property, the European rating system PEGI does not have an official rating for this title therefore other systems have been looked into. The North American board ESRB has provided a demographic rating for this title (4), stating that the game has been given the Teen classification for 'violence and suggestive themes'.

Platforms

Windows PC



Animated Violence, Suggestive Themes

No Interactive Elements

Assigned Rating Info

Beneath A Steel Sky is rated T for Teen by the ESRB with Animated Violence and Suggestive Themes.

Following the ESRB ratings guide for further audience information (5), the teen classification is reserved for "ages 13 and up" allowing games with this classification to contain "crude humour, violence and suggestive themes" which 'Beneath a Steel Sky' contains, as indicated in the image featured under visual styles and from dialect found in personal gameplay.

Having difficulty finding consumer trend demographics for video games in the 1990's the earliest report that could be found is a US industry market report published by the Entertainment Software Association (formerly known as Interactive Digital Software Association) in 2002 to report on the 2001 consumer landscape as found on archive.org and therefore will be utilised as an indicator for the early 1990's. The market study (6) reports that 34% of PC players are under 18 while game sales by rating stood at 24.6% for teens, sales by genre during this year had a segment of

8.8% for role playing, one of the core elements of adventure in 'Beneath a Steel Sky'. The 2022 ESA publication featured on the same page (6) reports that the age bracket for <18 was 24% and the "reason for playing" stood at 41% for role playing. Notably, over this 20 year period from 2002 - 2022 the most significant increase is the popularity of role playing titles and that there has been very little deviation in the segment of <18 players. Given this observation it is probable to assume that this would have what the market would have looked like in the early 1990's for North America and therefore 'Beneath a Steel Sky' would have been a fitting game for the intended demographic, as evident from the ESRB and ESA reports.

Visual Style



As seen on steam page (2)

Using an image from the steam webpage as reference (2), the game has a strong emphasis on keeping a consistent and detailed pixel design extending to the environments, the characters, items and text found within. This design choice is very likely a result of technological limitations around the 1994 release date. Exploring other games released during this era with an article from medium (3) to examine what was graphically available during this period it becomes clear that 'Beneath a Steel Sky' shared the same level of visual design as other titles of this era such as Prince Of Persia and Little Big Adventure, as listed in the medium article (3).

Audio & Visual Feedback

As with every title available, user input requires a directly noticeable output through both visual and audible feedback. Leading off of the visual style of this title and referring to the attached image found on the steam page (2), one example of direct feedback provided is through in-game characters, as a speaking character, when interacted with, will display large subtitles overhead accompanied by recorded audio. Many characters also feature branching text options that pop up with a choice bar, many examples of which can be found in a YouTube longplay video (7), with the image below (as seen in video) being one of these examples.



(Timestamp - 11:00, as seen in longplay)

An impact of these dialogue choices for the user is that several key pieces of information can be revealed allowing the user to progress through the game by searching the environment using provided clues by the characters.



(Timestamp - 42:24, as seen in longplay)

Another direct method of visual feedback the game provides is an overhead inventory system with accompanying logos to represent each item collected by the user throughout a single playthrough. When the user hovers the mouse over each item, a text description appears, possibly giving clues to how or where the user may apply these items, a further visual indicator that aids in user experience.

One of the key features in this title is the use of music as an audio device to lean deeper into the adventure elements by featuring a different composition depending on which section the player is currently present in, an example of this being the Upper Walkway as seen in the longplay (image featured below (7)).



(Timestamp - 24:24, as seen in longplay)

Game Structure & Flow

This title only contains one gameplay mode, a point and click theatre system. Through personal gameplay, the game will immediately launch straight into the official gameplay that confirms that this is the only mode available and therefore offers very little variety for the user. Although there is very little choice available the game does ensure that the fictional world it presents feels immersive through its available character and environment interactions paired with a strong ambience as discussed in the previous category.

'Beneath a Steel Sky' does provide a shell menu allowing the user to save or load their current playthrough, change the audio settings or otherwise exit the title completely, giving the user control over how long they choose to play for and adjusting audio settings so they may hear each element of the game to the best of their abilities. Two shell screens are present in the entirety of the game in the form of cutscenes, the opening cutscene providing the prologue of the story when a new playthrough is initiated and the developer credits that follow upon completion of the game, this is confirmed through a review of the longplay which reveals that the rest of the game is told entirely through player interaction.

Due to the simplicity of 'Beneath a Steel Sky' the general flow of the game follows a generally linear direction partly due to the point and click design of its gameplay leading to limitations as to what is possible in terms of storytelling. Following through with the longplay (7), while the game does feature elements of backtracking and certain rooms that serve no other purpose than further immersion, 'Beneath a Steel Sky' maintains a simple story flow that is easy to keep track of and enables the user to recall key information quickly which is suitable for the intended demographic as mentioned previously in this review.

Challenges

Leading back to Revolution Software's webpage for this title (1), a section was included providing a direct walkthrough for the title which gives probable cause that the game has proved challenging for players in segments. The second image featured in player feedback also alludes to challenges being present.

Being a point and click title, throughout the game the player will be mainly confronted with three challenge types which are the following:

- Interaction with characters to reveal clues, items and information that the user may use to their advantage in progression of the story
- Utilisation of the computer mouse to click on multiple interactive objects throughout the environments to collect items, whether necessary for progress or not, to be added to the inventory
- Making use of previously acquired items and information to interact with other portions of the environment in order to unlock new interactables

The three above-mentioned challenges work together in a loop with the story to ensure that each choice the player makes with the game feels entirely unique despite the repetitive design nature. Following the flow model (8), originally proposed by Csikszentmihalyi, because 'Beneath a Steel Sky' offers very little deviation from the challenge loop summarised above the game creates a danger for the player by falling under the boredom portion of the chart, which reduces the likelihood of overall player enjoyment.

Positive & Negative Attributes

With all of the previous categories deconstructed and examined they can be grouped by what specifics the game excels in and what elements could be improved to deliver a greater experience.

Positive attributes:

Genre - The combination of adventure and point and click provides the user with an exciting story fuelled by the dystopia that is presented immediately from the beginning to ensure the story is delivered at the right pace and produce an in-depth world that is (almost) free to explore.

Demographic - With the findings provided from the ESA reports, the content featured in the game is reasonable given its Teen ESRB classification. The popularity of this game would be stronger amongst this demographic due to the design and gameplay style available during this era of gaming.

Audio & visual feedback - Paired with demographic, the game is furthermore suitable for the teen demographic as the game is constructed to provide direct feedback in response to user interaction that will let the user progress at their own pace further cementing its status as a classic title.

Negative attributes:

Game Structure & Flow - Whether it's due to the demographic or due to limitations in the 1990s, while the structure follows the core design points of including gameplay modes and shell menus / screens 'Beneath a Steel Sky' does do poorly in this category having limited options for gameplay content and only having shell screens present at the start and end leaving the rest to player exploration.

Challenge - As mentioned through the gameplay structure, the flow and aforementioned challenge loop, due to the further lack of variety in this element the game falls in the boredom danger zone of the flow model because of the lack of challenge increase leading to no further use of skills beyond basic mouse controls.

Replay Value & Conclusion

After comparison of the positive & negative attributes, due to the major standout points of the negative attributes it is reasonable to assume that after the first playthrough of the game, there is negligible replay value due to all of the gameplay content being already presented in full meaning there is little left to discover depending on how well the user initially explored.

In conclusion, while 'Beneath a Steel Sky' has many great qualities through its unique content, this title does begin to show its age the more it is deconstructed for review. In saying this, it is by no means a title that should be overlooked as 'Beneath a Steel Sky' is the perfect title to study as an indicator of the 1990s

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AW - Game Review

GRADEMARK REPORT

FINAL GRADE

65 / 100

GENERAL COMMENTS

This report shows a solid understanding of Beneath a Steel Sky and places the game effectively within its historical and technological context.

The discussion of genre, demographic, visual style, and feedback is well researched and clearly supported with evidence, particularly in linking design decisions to the constraints of the early 1990s. The work is clearly structured and demonstrates good academic practice throughout.

However, much of the analysis remains descriptive, with limited critical interrogation of how design choices impact player experience beyond surface observation. Stronger synthesis of theory and more evaluative depth—particularly around flow, challenge, and replay value—would strengthen the overall argument.

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