

A Textual Analysis of Ancil Anthropy's 'Invader'

THE ONLY SURVIVOR of her fleet, invader sammie races toward her homeworld in her spacecraft. but a player anxious for bonus points follows her and shoots her down.

she crashes deep within a strange alien world. her ship is destroyed, but sammie is unharmed. her only thoughts of her partner and her beautiful podlings, sammie lifts her blasters and prepares for the long trip to the surface.

So reads the written introduction to *Invader*, a freeware action-adventure game created by Ancil “dessgeega” Anthropy¹. Released in 2006, *Invader* sympathetically documents the plight of Sammie - a gun-toting alien resembling a yellow octopus - as she attempts to escape her destroyed vessel's crash site and return home. To this end, the player must guide her through a winding labyrinth of tunnels full of hostile creatures, and destroy the mobile gun turret that shot her down. In this paper I will analyse *Invader*'s narrative, aesthetic and ludic elements, and explore the way Anthropy combines these artistic forms to create a strong thematic synergy.

Key to understanding *Invader* is its connection to Taito's 1978 arcade game *Space Invaders*. While no official relationship is stated, it is made implicitly clear that *Invader* is a work of meta-fiction; a non-canonical sequel that offers a new perspective on the original text. When read in this context, Sammie's appearance, and her ambiguous description as “the only survivor of her fleet”, establish that she is one of the titular *Space Invaders* of the original game, and the gun turret is one such as is controlled by its players. I will return to this contextual framing throughout the following analysis.

Narrative

Invader begins at the climax of a failed invasion, inviting players to experience the aftermath of a “successful” round of *Space Invaders* through the eyes of its vanquished antagonists – a complete role-reversal for those who have previously engaged in the classic arcade game's manic xenocide. The enigmatic “mystery saucer”, that many millions of players have indeed shot down purely for bonus points, has been symbolically broken open to reveal a pilot with a name, a face, and a sorrowful tale.

¹ <http://www.invader.dessgeega.com>

This recasting of Invader Sammie not as the transgressor but as the transgressed re-evaluates Space Invader's political dimension, exploring the tragic after-effects of shooting an anonymous enemy. As much of Invader's political agenda is transmitted through contextual comparisons such as this, it is important to understand the context it is being compared against.

The ethics of Space Invaders are widely accepted – it can be assumed that the advancing aliens are not part of some intergalactic peacekeeping force, and that preventing their progress is moral and just. Sammie has, however, been specifically placed in an ambiguous position. While they form a notable part of the Space Invaders' fleet, mystery saucers such as hers do not engage in any actual *invading*, instead merely gliding harmlessly across the top of the screen at regular intervals.

The moral grey area surrounding her involvement in the invasion, coupled with her personal motivation simply to return home to her family, has allowed Anthropy to paint Sammie somewhere between an everyday Jo caught up in a bad situation and a hero trying to escape her troubled past, with whom even Space Invaders veterans can sympathize without too much ethical wrangling.

All of this is wordlessly hinted at in the game's splash movie, culminating in the hand-drawn title screen in which Sammie is seen stepping out of the wreckage of her ship with her pistols ready. It is notable that the cinematic narrative elements are presented before the game formally begins. Once New Game is selected, the story is told through purely ergodic means until the game's completion presents the player with its only instance of narrative text – a short, simple status update to confirm that “YOU HAVE ESCAPED”.

The narrative stemming from the actions of the player varies very little throughout the course of the game: in short, Sammie traverses a series of areas containing threats and obstacles, until she reaches the cave mouth and destroys the mobile gun turret that shot her down. From this perspective, there is little to be said about her gradual progression out of the crash pit, but it is clear that the final boss encounter represents a critical point in the story. Aside from its unique character design, the prestige of having two

unique theme tunes associated with the encounter, and its position as the final challenge of the game, the boss' lair is the only area which ensnares the player, opening its exit only when triggered by the gun turret's defeat.

Why must Sammie destroy the gun turret? Putting aside technical reasoning about event triggers, the most immediate rationale would be to seek revenge – either for her own situation, or in the name of her dead comrades. It should be recalled at this point, however, that her only thoughts upon embarking on this epic adventure were “of her partner and her beautiful podlings”; the desire for vengeance is notably absent.

Does her hatred of the gun turret develop as a result of her journey? It's possible that, as she comes to realise just how far she must travel, she begins to focus her blame upon it. A more literal reading would suggest that, in being the first to open fire, the turret itself is responsible for forcing the final battle, with Sammie merely defending herself in order to survive. It could even be an impersonal matter of practicality – Sammie must destroy the gun in order to create a safe air space through which to return home. The game offers no definitive answer.

This ambiguity blurs the moral framing of the final battle; Sammie must fight the gun turret to the death, although it is no longer clear who is attacking who. This is yet another play on Space Invaders' absolutist philosophy, and is one of the more effective examples. Players cannot be sure who is responsible for this duel and so, for a brief time, both Sammie and her opponent homogenise within the same moral position, as both attacker and defender.

As will be explained in the Ludics section, the specific challenges set before the player form a set of patterns that are designed to build upon each other and becoming increasingly complex and interwoven as the game progresses, but there are no great shocks to the overarching story – no emergent sub-plots for players to pick up on, or abandoned alien ships that offer a merciful early escape from the pit. Only in the final boss encounter does the gameplay itself form a notable narrative, and even this is essentially restricted to a single outcome.

Does this weaken the game? It represents a simplistic application of gameplay as a narrative vehicle – the player has few meaningful choices and, ultimately, suffers a loss of agency as a result. It could be argued that this is in keeping with the tradition of classic 'run and gun' gameplay but, for a game as thoughtfully post-modern as *Invader*, it simply seems like a missed opportunity.

In any case, *Invader*'s strict faithfulness to the interactive form reflects Anthropy's purist philosophy on game design. Using cinematic cut-scenes or literary passages to further the storyline within the game proper would require the player to alternate between 'playing' and 'viewing'. By eschewing this common technique, there is a much greater sense of 'media consistency' that affords players the comfort of staying within one role for the duration of the game. It is not, however, without its drawbacks.

That the details of Sammie's personal life - her primary motivation for crawling out of that smoking pit - must be conveyed in a text file accompanying the game program, represents another minor failure in *Invader*'s narrative discourse. It also demonstrates the difficulty in expressing a character's private thoughts and emotions in the kind of interactive media format that *Invader* aspires to – a task made more challenging by its 8-bit era, sprite-based graphical style.

Aesthetics

Visually, *Invader* is a throwback to home console games of the early 90's, particularly the PC Engine's distinct style of high-colour, low-detail sprites. This is no doubt due in part to the technical specifications of the software used to create the game – Mark Overmars' freeware Game Maker studio – but could also be attributed to Anthropy's notable affection for the aforementioned console². Using simple 2D sprites with minimal animation such as these creates a stylistic point of reference for players, encouraging an ambient mood of nostalgia befitting the sequel to a game almost 30 years old.

² <http://pcengine.dessgeega.com/>



Sammie



'Octopus' Invader

As mentioned earlier, Invader's character designs are largely based on those of Space Invaders. Sammie (shown above)³ is clearly one of the 'octopus' enemies (albeit one who piloted a mystery saucer), while the mobile gun turret is obviously modelled on the defending player's craft, and the monsters Sammie encounter bear a striking resemblance to her former allies. Not only does this represent an even more explicit visual reference to jog players' memories, but it raises implications about the world of Invader.

Why does Sammie appear to be attacked by her fellow Invaders? The most logical reason seems to be simply that the planet upon which Invader is set – and, by extension, Space Invaders – is populated by such beings. This represents a certain amount of creative license on Anthropy's part, suggesting that the planet being invaded was populated, and defended, by the same alien species present in Sammie's fleet.

This can be read as another attempt at subverting Space Invaders' political context. Rather than defending Earth from alien attack, as most players would assume, it is proposed that they have been defending one alien civilisation from another, identical one. This satirises the polarised notions of 'good' and 'bad' by suggesting that the invaders and defenders share many fundamental traits – another instance of the homogeneity theme.

Our time with Sammie is spent gliding silently through a series of audio-visually distinct zones in which landmarks are notated not in terms of visual details but in terms of gameplay challenges - the enemies, walls, blocks and decorations rarely change in appearance, but assume different configurations on every screen. The world of Invader is at once colourful yet bleak, where any exploratory wonder arising from entering a new area soon gives way to an impatient desire to hurry through to the next. It is easy to imagine that this could reflect Sammie's own feelings as she races for freedom through this alien landscape.

³ The images of Sammie and the 'Octopus' invader were taken from Invader and Space Invaders, respectively

This sensation is reinforced by the game's musical score. Composed by Andrew "Andonuts" Toups, the soundtrack represents one of only two game elements not created by the game's author – the other being Jonathan "Persona" Kim's dramatic title screen illustration. Musically, *Invader* frames each of its zones with a distinct tune, dropping away into silence whenever the player is near the central crash pit.

Sammie's adventure begins with a jaunty tune that reflects her spunky heroism. However, punctuated by silence as the player crosses back and forth across the central chasm, the music seems to gradually move its focus away from her and onto her surroundings. This contextual metamorphosis reaches its apex with the electronic death march of the final boss, at which point the musical subject has been completely shifted from Sammie to her nemesis.

This is another, much more oblique, example of *Invader* breaking down the conceptual boundaries between opposing forces. That both Sammie and the gun turret are deemed worthy of their own musical themes denotes their equal importance within the narrative; they exist as a single entity (perhaps best described as 'conflict') that would lose all meaning if either were absent. Once again, the similarities between enemies are being brought to the fore.

The most striking musical feature, however, is the silence of the pit. It serves as a solemn reminder that Sammie's crashed ship – representing her inability to return to her loved ones – is at the centre of the game thematically, as well as geographically. In this way, the geographical aesthetics are again being used to subtly impress Sammie's own feelings upon the player; however long they spend exploring the tunnels of this alien world, the player's thoughts, like Sammie's, are inevitably led back to the crash site time and again.

Ludics

Invader's core gameplay concerns itself with moving Sammie from the entrance of each single-screen area to the corresponding exit. As she can float in any direction, this is spatially unproblematic; the challenge of the game comes from evading the fatal threat of the monsters and gun pods that litter the route of her journey.

There are two species of monster – purple and grey - both of which swarm towards Sammie for as long as they are on-screen. Additionally, the grey monsters, along with the stationary gun pods, fire bullets at regular intervals. Contact with monsters or bullets kills Sammie instantly, causing the current area to reset, with her repositioned back at the entrance as if nothing had happened.

Some areas include indestructible, pipe-like 'generators' from which new monsters will regularly appear. Furthermore, an indirect threat is posed by the plethora of harmless grey blocks which regularly bar Sammie's progress and must be shot repeatedly to clear a path. While the blocks cannot directly attack, they frequently serve as a retarding factor, slowing the player down while monsters and bullets draw ever closer.

Each area represents a unique spatial puzzle, defined by its geographical shape and the starting positions of any monsters, gun pods, blocks and generators. The particular challenges present in each puzzle can be thought of as a set of discreet streams that, over time, develop in depth and begin to overlap. For example, one room may feature an impeding wall of blocks that must be destroyed if the player is to progress; another may include a monster generator that ratchets up the pressure by spawning more enemies. Later, players may be confronted with two large walls of blocks, along with a pair of generators, combining both challenge elements.

Sammie's only form of interaction with her world comes via the use of a pair of pistols, destructive tools that she puts to use in vanquishing would-be attackers and a great number of grey blocks. For some seemingly arbitrary reason, Sammie can only shoot horizontally, creating a great many instances – particularly within the blast pit – where the game's author taunts the player with a horizontal line of blocks that they simply cannot pass.

Why doesn't Sammie simply shoot upwards and blast her way to freedom? This task seems simple to an outside observer, yet Sammie displays a somewhat psychosomatic inability to do so and struggles to cope with basic obstacles. Once the player accepts this restriction and floats down a tunnel into area one, they'll find that Sammie has a paradoxically easier time when taking a harder path past monsters and gun pods.

The same philosophy is found in the multiple routes offered to the player – by surviving harder screens, players can shortcut past sizeable sections of the game. In a sense, Sammie's journey becomes easier as she is subjected to more danger, creating a sadistic pay-off for players who take on the extra challenge.

Solving these more difficult puzzles requires a deeper observation of Invader's rules. For example, some screens are impossible to complete without using enemy bullets to destroy blocks that Sammie herself cannot shoot, turning your opponents into unwitting allies. Conversely, one of the game's final puzzles requires players to pick a path through a series of block walls, in such a fashion that the remaining blocks protect them from a horde of advancing grey monsters.

Compare this emergent philosophy with the game's opening story. While the player responsible for shooting Sammie down was anxious to kill as many enemies as possible, Sammie learns through the course of her adventure that her enemies are often very useful if left alive.

This theme undergoes an ironic twist in the game's climactic boss battle. Following its brief introduction, the mobile gun turret begins tracking Sammie's horizontal position and fires a startling number of bullets and lasers up towards her, in such a pattern that bullet-dodging players will find themselves intuitively moving in the manner of a Space Invader. Between sweeping dodges to the left and right, players must take advantage of pauses in the turret's movement to make quick downward dips, until they are low enough to shoot it in the side and decisively punish its genocidal tendencies.

In this way, the rapidly-escalating conflict completes the player's transformation from a concerned supporter of Sammie into a regular Space Invader. For former Space Invaders players, this represents a conversion not just of appearance or political alignment, but of gameplay itself – the fundamental identifying feature of videogames.

Analysis

It is clear that these broad artistic elements – narrative, aesthetics and ludics - have two central messages threaded through them.

Firstly, there is the theme of homogeneity in conflict. It is implied repeatedly – through the art, music, gameplay and back-story – that the opposing factions in both *Invader* and *Space Invaders* bear a number of fundamental similarities.

Secondly, there is the promotion of non-aggressive co-existence. Sammie's enemies provide as much assistance as they do a threat, if the player can learn how to work alongside them. Conversely, the mobile gun turret's story arc reads like a classical tragedy, its destruction brought about by its own insistence on shooting as many enemies as possible.

Taken together, these two ideas form a pacifist question and answer. Anthropy suggests that violent conflict is largely due to superficial differences, and asks what can be done to curb such senseless destruction; the solution, simultaneously proposed, is for those involved in such conflicts to look beyond their petty disputes and work together for the common good.

The coherency with which it deals with such weighty issues says a lot about *Invader*'s intended audience - clearly it is no accident that these mature themes pervade the game at all levels. It can be assumed that Anthropy intended the audience to appreciate the work put into unifying the game's design, meaning they must have prior knowledge of *Space Invaders*, with enough insight to appreciate the deeper political themes. It must also be noted that it is a creatively under-designed game, relying instead on the simple pleasures of bare bones shoot-em-up gameplay to keep players hooked.

From these observations, it can be surmised that *Invader* is a game intended for “mature gamers” - experienced, adult players who can enjoy overcoming challenges and following metaphors without the need for great spectacle. An observation of its “marketing campaign” would support this theory – Anthropy posted information and links to *Invader* on a number of independent gaming websites and relied on word of mouth to spread the

news. Typical visitors to such sites are adult gamers looking for an interesting gameplay experience, and their word of mouth is most likely to target friends of a similar disposition.

Conclusion

Invader is a game of hidden depths. Encoded across all areas of its design is a strikingly coherent anti-war message, yet it is presented as a very innocent game that makes no assumptions or requirements of its players' prior knowledge. It blends videogame nostalgia and pacifist sensibilities to create a very personal experience that reflects the designer's own philosophy.

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