

Why We Can't Rely on GDC Talks: Accountability in Developer Intentionality

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Keywords

developer intentionality, GDC talks, game design, developer interviews

ABSTRACT

GDC Talks are a highly valued source of knowledge about game design. With topics ranging from bizdev to audio tools to bolstering a player community, they're often looked to for insights into the industry from both the success stories and the memorable failures, with an emphasis on identifying "takeaways" (Engström 2019). Importantly, GDC talks often have to be approved by a studio's legal team (to avoid NDA disclosures) or PR (to ensure branding and content are suitable for public presentation). As a result, GDC talks are colloquially considered to be PR-driven. This raises a question about how well GDC Talks reflect the intent of specific game designers. In this paper, I will investigate this by comparing a GDC Talk, Ghost in the Empathy Machine (Garriss & Zimmerman, 2022), with developer interviews I conducted around the central messaging within the game Life is Strange: True Colours (Deck Nine, 2021). I seek to answer, beyond commercial success, what do developers care about when making games?

Games (and by extension, game developers) provide players with an opportunity for impactful and emotionally pleasurable gameplay and experiences. This paper bridges the gap between theories on design processes (Hagen 2011; Khaled et al. 2018) and player studies (Baharom et al. 2014; Denisova et al. 2021; Tanenbaum and Tanenbaum 2009) to investigate how a game takes shape and lands in players' hands. Additionally, it seeks to add a potential framework where postmortems fall short, often focusing on the production issues over what is produced (Whitson 2020). I argue that developer intentionality is a key part of a game analysis, but where it manifests is complicated by the hierarchy, marketing, and teamwork involved in game production.

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

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I conducted 4 in-depth interviews with lead developers from the Deck Nine team. A game analysis (Fernández-Vara 2019) and textual analysis (McKee 2003) of player forums informed my questions, highlighting moments of broken immersion or heightened emotion as points of discussion with the developers. There was an emphasis on discussing their processes and design decisions. Each interview ran between 30-90 minutes and focused on their contribution to the game, major design pivots during production, and what they wanted players to get out of playing the game. These interviews revealed consistent intentions and themes: empathy, finding home, and the weight of carrying a franchise onwards.

The Life is Strange franchise has prided itself on telling compelling and emotional stories. Driven by narrative, these games have a particular incentive to elicit feelings in their player community. Specifically, Life is Strange: True Colours weaves emotions through every game element, from the mechanics and gameplay to scenic views and soundtrack, to amplify the game's affectivity and emotional game design around its central theme - empathy. Through comparing the GDC Talk and developer interviews, I highlight the choices that developers made to reflect this in art, sound, gameplay, and narrative.

Part of these developer interviews involved asking what "success" looked like once the game was out of their hands. What they wanted players to get from the gameplay experience. Most emphasised that they succeeded when "the message of empathy got across" or that players "felt something". While these are arguably vague ambitions, this was consistent across the developers I spoke with. In the GDC talk, Deck Nine's creative director highlighted "emotional self-integrity" and teaching this integrity for empathy "in a healthy way" as the desired key takeaways for the game. While both playing the game and interviewing developers, the central theme of empathy was omnipresent, but emotional self-integrity was not referred to by any of the developers. This indicates a gap between developer intentionality and the stories that are told about a game's production. Narratives about development are easily retrofitted when we lack evidence to the contrary, which is where accountability, or traceability, in design processes is key (Barr 2023). Through this comparison, I will show that while we may not be privy to the specific design decisions happening behind closed studio doors, we can reconstruct and materialise designer intentions and desires through analysis-informed interviews to better understand a game's development beyond pseudo-marketing materials.

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