

Ambient Canvas:
Into The Breach and Player Narrative

Chance Lytle

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Stripped bare, *Into The Breach* is a chess composition, a pre-set problem with a defined tactical goal and sound logic, free from an overarching strategy. Perfect information on an eight-by-eight board with a roughly deterministic puzzle box to solve. However, in chess, the aesthetic value of these puzzles is found by players using all the provided pieces to explore a composer's ideas, themes, and intended solution, of which there is just one. *Into The Breach* jettisons this in favor of varied player expression, letting them choose what they take into battle. Further, the strategic layer and attrition of longer, full chess games is exchanged for one of skill trees, upgrade paths, and class limits. These ignite the rapid turn economy of the tactical layer with countless approaches and solutions. If the beauty of chess is knowing when to use all your pieces, the beauty of *Into The Breach* is playing against the desperation of only choosing three. The idea of carrying your strained mechs and characters, individually named rather than cast as Knight or Rook, from one minimal composition to the next is tied into every part of its presentation, from its stray dialogue to its foregrounded music to its seamless interface. *Into The Breach* focuses its design to work off an ambient canvas to grow player expression and emergent narratives from every tactical decision.

The game's core loop is customizing a team, completing a mission, and earning new abilities. All missions and rewards are randomized, ensuring every timeline the player travels through is different. What predominately makes each run unique, though, are the pilots and squads. The player matches one of over thirteen pilots to one of nine squads containing three set

mechs each. The pilot is chosen for synergy or character, but each squad is centered on a playstyle, from covering the battlefield in electrical smoke to forcing the enemies to friendly fire. Squads are the strongest area for players to express themselves in, practicing each one as they unlock them until one clicks into place. Like fighting game mains, the flow found in an experienced squad with great weapon pickups is fantastic. However, players can also disrupt the provided squads by creating their own lineup or randomizing it. Mixing and matching and upgrading your mechs as desired is deeper than the presets' tuned balance; it creates a range from easier to harder lineups. Players can pick their difficulty this way, but the overall balance remains strong. How custom squads can feel just as closely knit as premade squads after a few rounds of practice is testament to the game's always fair balance at every level, no matter the outside pressure of random pickups or procedural missions.

The meaning behind the variety of player expression is found in the game's sense of stoic detachment, derived from the rhythms and repetitions of each run. The narrative synchronizes turn resets and game overs with time travel. This enforces cyclic reincarnation and adds narrative weight to the abandonment of timelines, of lives, and of valuable squad configurations. Losing a chess pawn is justified, but losing a mech pilot hurts. Familiar faces and places flash by between the micro-tactics, certain to be seen again but certain to sting when lost. The reason for playing this game is to protect the people of Earth, directly tied to your health through the Grid Power and to your final points score, but there is rarely an optimal choice to be made. Pressure comes from your current squad, lack of good pickups, or an early misplay's ripple effect. Pragmatic loss, especially with added sentimentality, will happen along the way, but the pilots signed up for this. The mechs can be rebuilt. Weapons can be found again. Player favorites should not supersede human lives. That defense of the Grid and the humans it represents is what

the game is designed around. The game's supporting art, writing, and music elevate this emotional design by elevating the player into feeling like the stoic, self-sacrificing hero they are.

Playing in a living space eases understanding of the game's rules by tying them back to the emotional design. The game's primary presentation is on an isometric diorama with bouncing pixel figures and distinct colors schemes beyond brown and black, more lighthearted than other apocalyptic games. The tactics and strategy of gameplay are at home here. All ancillary communication from the board, flavor or not, is strictly subordinate to mechanical communication, but twists around and makes the mechanics feel just, dutiful, and right. Easily readable UI elements, well-coordinated information pacing, and recurring enemies all allow the game to do this. It can focus the player on each boards' natural vitality, contextualizing their interactions. Text bubble cries of help or dismayed radio chatter from dependents pressure a player's decision of letting buildings fall. Earthquakes and tidal waves washing over the board make every battle's potential finality feel close. The immutable, asymmetric Vek sharply contrast the living boards and even the flexibility of players, set in their ways as repeated sprites with perfectly predictable and preset attacks, making them a distinguishable threat. Yet, this all remains colorful and understanding of the mechanical priority. The boards' unobtrusiveness when presenting all of this, never focusing your camera on an objective or breaking flow, is their strength in the world. Players use the UI for its directness and play for the mechanics, but color their decisions and immeasurable stories with the provided aesthetics.

The characters that populate the boards and mechs tell a different story from the latter's relative lightheartedness, but still ambiently support the player's decision making. Like the possible playstyles and timelines, each pilot lives a different story. Each has their own theory on how the game world works, with all its time travel and robot physics. The in-universe cynicism

toward repeating costly problems and missions over and over is made apparent and discussed, not ignored. Isaac the scientist regrets his studies being used for war, and Gana the AI wishes to only go back to its destroyed gardens. But above all, every pilot has a reason to continue fighting. Abe the armored warrior is implied to check on his family in each new timeline, Bethany the defender knows that for every saved timeline, there is another that is in just as much danger. In chess, the gameplay is set around eliminating your enemies—utilitarian. While that may be a part of it in *Into The Breach*, the pilots stand as examples of responsibility for the player. Their rebuff of their own cynicism by going once more into each new breach adds weight to players' desire to prioritize humanity over comrades, the gameplay's main goal.

With every visual element primarily dedicated to information flow, the music is free to set any tone it wants. The game's colors and sprites are to the setting's common grit as the soundtrack's guitar is to the genre's usual musical humbleness. The soundtrack is assertive and far from ambient. The key word used when developing its tone was “desperation,” backing music for pilots fighting against all odds over and over again. Layered bass and rhythm guitars power the players' resolve, melancholic strings feel like they're veterans of a hundred battles. The soundtrack sticks to analogues, be they wooden claves or six-strings, and enhances them with electronic backing. It remains naturally human rather than entirely mechanical. With that, the human lives you are saving are foregrounded and ever present, completing the support for the player's heroics.

At the start of each session, the player is, like the pilots, choosing to defend the world. The creative constraints of mech and pilot selection when choosing squads limits players just enough to have a balanced range of playstyles while letting them find their own niche to keep fighting in. The ambient set dressing makes those choices and every one taken throughout a run

matter more than just numbers and strategy. With this combination of gameplay and worthwhile context, *Into The Breach* flips its chess heritage on its head as it focuses player goals on unique expression and compassion instead of cold, matched offense.