Game Narrative Review

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Month/Year you submitted this review: March, 2021

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Game Title: Doki Doki Literature Club!
Platform: PC
Genre: Visual Novel/Psychological Horror
Release Date: 09/22/2017
Developer: Team Salvato
Publisher: Team Salvato
Game Writer/**Creative Director**/**Narrative Designer:** Dan Salvato

Overview

Hey, I heard you have yet to join a school club. I have just the thing for you. I would like to introduce you to Doki Doki Literature Club! Now, I am just a former member. I had to take a step away because Moni-…ahem…personal reasons. I just got too busy to keep up with the books we discussed…yeah! That's it…

Why don't I just give you a run down on what to expect when joining the club?

There are currently four members in the club: Yuri, Sayori, Natsuki, and…. Monika…wow I really cannot say her name without sweating. No matter, I am sure you will love her. Each member has their own unique personalities, and they are quite welcoming to new members.

Perhaps too welcoming…

Are you single? Well, it just so happens these girls are single too. The club brings about opportunity to find love. Just please watch out for her…I managed to get away for a short while, but you may not be so lucky.

She is always listening.

Always.

Run.

Characters

- Sayori: She was just an absolute ray of sunshine. She is the Vice President of the club for now. She has actually been your neighbor and close friend for a while. Small world, right? I think she would really love it if you joined the club. She talks about you all the time. Perhaps a bit of a crush is developing? To be honest, I think there is a lot going on behind that happy exterior. She was always late to the club and eats all the time. I would be lying if I said I was never worried during my time in the club. I tried to talk to her and comfort her before it all happened. Then SHE stepped in…it's all my fault all my fault all my fault all my fault all my fault all my fault all my fault all my fault all my fault all my fault all my fault all my fault all my fault all my fault all my fault all my fault all my fault.
- Natsuki: When I first met her, she was quite cold. However, once you get to know her, she is a decent person. Do NOT call her cute. Just trust me. She seems small but she can really hold her own and is not afraid to stand up for herself. She does not often let her passions, like reading manga, shine through her shell though. Her home life is not as amazing as it could be. Her father loathes that she enjoys manga and often abuses her for it. Isn't that terrible? I'll admit it…I say that, but a little voice in my head asks why I even care. Perhaps I shouldn't care. That voice…it sounds like…
- Yuri: She is quite shy, so you have to be a bit patient with her when first getting to know her. After a while, she will show you a wonderful side of her that holds a lot of knowledge and passion for literature. Did you know she enjoys writing poems? She takes great interest in the complexities of words and humanity and often expresses it in her writing. Sometimes, she can be so enthralled in reading or writing that she ignores the world around her. I sometimes think that she ignores people on purpose. You might be better off avoiding her. She's worthless anyways. Wait…what am I…that voice…so loud…
- Monika: She is just the best. She is the acting president of the club and will listen to every problem you may have. She is always listening. She is also fond of poetry, writing only about things she genuinely loves. Maybe she will write a poem about you. Haha, just kidding. She also practices the piano in her spare time. If you do really good in the club, she may just play a song for you. Her voice…is so captivating…captive⌗□⤴⍓⤴⊇●▣&⌗⤴•⊇⍓●&⍓□⌗◎ ⅏⤴⍓□⌗□&⌘⌗⤴•&●⤴⊇•●&⌗□⌘•⊇⤴&⌘•⊇&●⌘•⤴ ⊇&●⍓⤴&⌘●⍓●&⌘•⊇⤴□&⤴⍓•⤴⍓◎ ⍓□⅏⍓⅏⅏

  Every day, I imagine a future where I can be with you
  In my hand is a pen that will write a poem of me and you
  The ink flows down into a dark puddle
  Just move your hand, write the way into his heart
  But in this world of infinite choices
  What will it take just to find that special day
  What will it take just to find that special day

Breakdown

        Doki Doki Literature Club! is a dating simulator visual novel with catchy music and happy characters that compete for the players attention, or at least that is what I thought. When I was told by a friend to download the game and play, I failed to notice the "psychological horror" tag on Steam. The game starts off fairly normal. The player begins walking to school with their childhood friend, Sayori, who tricks them into joining her Literature Club. There are three other members of this club: Yuri, Monika, and Natsuki. Yuri is a reclusive bookworm that opens up about her passions for reading and writing the more the player spends time with her. Natsuki, at first glance, seems cute and child-like but has an aggressive exterior. Monika is the president of the club and does well to organize it and the events they are apart of. Sayori, being the ray of sunshine she is, wants everyone to get along and for the player to become friends with everyone. This sense of normalcy lasts for a while, but Sayori becomes more closed off as the club prepares for the school festival. This is when characters begin to move past their archetypes into something more real and, honestly, relatable.

        Sayori tells the player that she has been suffering from depression her whole life and her happy exterior is so that she does not feel like a weight on everyone else's shoulders. She explains that it is difficult when people care about her, it would be far easier if the player ignored her and began spending more time with everyone else because, in Sayori's mind, she is not worth the energy. Despite the player character telling Sayori that they will never leave her, letting her know that they care, she hangs herself the day of the festival and is discovered by the player.

        This is a dark turn for a game that, from what I understood, would be a casual dating sim with teenage archetypes I have seen countless variations of, but the game gets even crazier from here. After Sayori dies, the game resets from the beginning with occasional glitches in the text and screen. The player is forced to continue knowing that they will not see Sayori again. Monika explains prior to it all that the player should make sure to save their game because who knows what might happen in the future. This gave me the idea that I could go back and save her, but I could not no matter how hard I tried. As someone with depression and who has had experience with suicide, when the player character starts saying it's all their fault and that they could have saved her, I had to stand up and take a lap around the room because I have said those same things to myself and I was able to connect with this game on a level I was not entirely prepared for.

        Sayori is not the only one fighting their own inner demons in the game. Yuri progressively becomes more obsessive with the player and soon it is discovered that she cuts herself, with Monika brushing it off as something she just does from time to time. Natsuki enjoys things like Manga and baking, but her father does not provide a safe home environment for her because of this. She often exclaims that she feels happier in the club than she does at home. Monika is revealed to be the catalyst for everyone's mental illness to get the better of them. Yuri stabs herself multiple times, dying, and Natsuki just simply gets deleted, leaving the player alone with Monika until they decide to delete Monika's game file. One of the final moments in the game, is a letter from Monika giving her final goodbye to the club and the player, stating that the club is a place where no happiness can be found and then singing a song dedicated to the player.

        The game displays these high school students as more complex characters than simple cute girls with little depth beyond surface level personality. They have real

problems that I and countless others have. Sayori not revealing much of herself because she feels she is not as important as everyone else is something I constantly struggle with and have for the past 20 years of my life. Yuri always second guessing herself and Natsuki afraid that people will not take her seriously just because she likes certain things are overwhelmingly relatable traits. Finally, the depiction of blame after discovering Sayori is something I was able to connect to the unfortunate experiences I have. These are real things that happen to people and playing this a second time after life-changing events, trauma, and therapy gave me a new lens to view this game through and allowed me to further appreciate what it does to a genre that has countless variations of the same formula and tropes.

Strongest Element

The complexity of characters and showing the extremes of mental illness in each was a welcome surprise. The creator of the game stated that he enjoys games that push the status quo and take risks, this game does just that. It uses happiness as a mask for the characters and the player becomes part of that, while Monika tries to rip the mask off to drive them into her arms. The characters are not crazy, they are hurting and have been for quite some time. Depression, anxiety, and other mental disorders are inherently scary. That is why the game has properly earned the horror tag by just adding something that many people of all ages go through daily to this batch of visual novel characters.

Unsuccessful Element

Monika does not have the same depth as the rest of the roster has. While I previously mentioned that characters come off as in pain rather than crazy, Monika just comes off as crazy. She does not have the same explanation as other characters do and the only reasoning that she gives for her behavior is that the game did not make her a romanceable option, so she deleted the other girls to give the player no choice but to spend eternity with her. I had little understanding of why she did what she did. I did not know much about her beyond her obsessive love for the player. Yuri had a similar obsession, but players got a deeper look into her psyche and why she behaves the way she does. I only wish Monika were afforded the same treatment.

Highlight

The use of writing as a vehicle for conveying emotions is done beautifully. Writing is such an intimate thing, and I could not count on my two hands how many instances I have took to writing, whether it be in a journal or a work of fiction, to ease my mind of pain and grief. Authors place pieces of themselves in what they write, and the same truth applies to these characters. Yuri often dwells on the past and Natsuki often thinks of giving up despite trying as best she can. These are all feelings displayed in the poems they show to the player during their time in the clubroom. I think writing can be therapeutic in that way and when Yuri says that poetry and writing can properly display the most complex feelings that people have, I felt as though the game peered right into my soul and probably every other creative that decided to download the game and play.

Critical Reception

Victoria Rose, a writer for Polygon, wrote that video games are supposed to lend the player control, but this game "quite literally overwrites that control, taking the tropes of metafiction, horror and visual novel genres and amping them up a few notches." With everything unraveling before the players eyes, she notes that she became less and less confident in what the goal of the game was. "All I could do was move forward and find some light at the end of the tunnel. (Well, hopefully.)" She gave no score but commended the game for subverting her expectations.

Steven Wright wrote for PCGamer that "Doki Doki takes great care to treat issues like depression and anxiety with more tact and delicacy than its apparent inspirations, like the infamous School Days." He says that the game cleverly leaves breadcrumbs throughout that hints to the bleak second half of the game. It does not just simply mess with the player's mind for the sake of absurdity. "Doki Doki Literature Club! is a post-modern love letter to the genre it represents, and it waves goodbye to all its constituent tropes as it smashes their very foundation into tiny pieces." He gives no score but states it is the most surprising game of 2017 and is a must-play.

Lessons

- **People are far more complex than they appear.**
  - Archetypes are easy. I often call them "Breakfast Club" characters because of the common tropes they all portray. Yet, much like the Anthony Michael Hall's character hinting at his apparent depression, there is more going on with the game's cast than meets the eye and the game takes the time to explore it. It makes getting to know characters far more rewarding, much like getting to know someone in real life.
- **Subverting expectations is about player assumption.**
  - These tropes are used phenomenally as a tool to get the player to think a certain way. I thought I knew what the game would be, and I was very wrong. Using common character templates is not always a bad thing. Dan Salvato has proved to me that they can make way for grand twists and turns that grabbed ahold of my attention and never let go.
- **Mental illness is more than just a vehicle for shock value.**
  - Things like depression and anxiety are becoming more and more commonly diagnosed. Thankfully, it has become more normalized in recent years to discuss it and seek help. This game treats it as something that people have to live with rather than something that is just meant to make the player uncomfortable or on edge. Sayori talks about depression as something she has struggled with her whole life and becomes far more vulnerable as she dives deeper into how she feels and why she acts the way she does. This is a moment of clarity and relatability. People without mental illness may not fully understand those that do, but they can try. That is what the player character does, even stating that they do not know if it's the right thing to do, but they care. I felt far more intimately connected with the game's characters than any other visual novel I have played because of these moments of vulnerability.

Summation

My time in the club was…interesting to say the least. I'm not saying I did not enjoy it, but it made me worry about those girls, and scared of one in particular. Yet, I would not trade my experience for the world. Each moment was a moment of looking into myself and how I deal with my own head. Of course, since my first time joining the club many years ago, I have begun to go to therapy and experienced things I never thought I would.

I was awry when first meeting the girls, I wasn't sure I could make any friends. As I got to know them, I realized we had far more in common than I thought. They slowly became more vulnerable around me, revealing bits of themselves that are foundational aspects of their character. I always believed that vulnerability is necessary for proper connection. The strongest bonds are ones founded on this idea.

Making friends became a more feasible idea, until SHE intervened. Was it worth it Monika? Whoever is reading this review, watch out for her. She tried to take away my friends, saying she did it out of love. Is that really love?

When you join the club, I need you to do something for me. Go into your game files and find a folder called characters. Open it and ⬚⬚⬚⬚⬚⬚⬚⬚. Wait, what's happening? ⬚⬚⬚⬚⬚⬚. Monika? Are you ⬚⬚⬚⬚⬚⬚? ⬚⬚⬚⬚⬚⬚⬚ **GET OUT OF MY HEAD**⬚⬚⬚⬚⬚⬚⬚⬚⬚

⬚⬚⬚⬚ Help ⬚⬚⬚⬚⬚⬚

Does my pen only write bitter words for those who are dear to me
Is it love if I take you, or is it love if I set you free
The ink flows down into a dark puddle
How can I write love into reality?
If I can't hear the sound of your heartbeat
What do you call love in your reality
And in your reality, if I don't know how to love you
I'll leave you be