Game Narrative Review

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Overview

We Know the Devil is a visual novel centered around three unlucky teenagers tasked with "cleaning up the devil" at their Christian summer camp for bad kids. Left to their own devices, they take shelter inside an old cabin at the edge of the woods, clutching magical radios that are supposed to ward against satan himself. *Not that he'll actually come, right?* The player acts as the arbiter of the characters' relationships, choosing who to pair together and who to exclude during their late night conversations. As the game progresses, the threat of demonic possession looms ever larger as the three realize exactly where they stand amongst each other. Abandoned by god in a dark, decaying cabin for twelve hours, the characters realize that in order to survive, one must be left behind. It's up to you, the player, to choose which two deserve to save each other and which one deserves to meet a dreadful fate.

Characters

While the game intentionally leaves large gaps in the worldbuilding, it's assumed that the campers have grouped into various teams, forcing the three main characters into an uneasy alliance. It's unclear how any of the characters ended up here, and the writers specifically avoid fleshing out their backstories in order to focus on the characters' present dynamic. Jupiter, Neptune, and Venus comprise the Summer Scouts' "Group West".

- **Jupiter (♃):**

    "But even if I don't say it, I still feel it. Like a hand in the air. Holding tight."

    The tomboy who is good at everything except for when it counts. She's the teammate who always misses the winning goal, the star student who blanks on the last question. She's also become the de facto leader of Group West, mainly because nobody else really wants to. Much to Neptune's irritation and Venus' admiration, Jupiter is the "perfect role

model" who can't get it quite right, unable to figure out if she's only good for the sake of being good. The harder she tries, the more the adults hate her. Beneath her chill exterior, Jupiter burdens herself with everyone else's expectations and never extends a modicum of grace or understanding to herself. As she eventually learns, being perfect will get her nowhere… except for maybe an encounter with the devil.

- **Neptune (♆):**

  "I want to make it so bad she has to say it. I want to hear it out loud."

  The stereotypical mean girl who balances her bitchiness with humor. She's beautiful and spiky and outspoken, everything that Neptune and Venus are not. To everyone outside of Group West, she's untouchable, protected by her ever-rolling eyes and snarky, cutting comments. Even the adults don't really know what to do with her. But when Neptune talks to Jupiter and Venus, there's a certain tenderness undercutting her usual blunt dialogue. She's mean because she cares, and on a subconscious layer, because she's jealous of them. Given the chance, she would happily tear Jupiter and Venus down to her level and make the world a little less "good". Whether that is due to her own insecurities or a genuine effort to break Jupiter and Venus out of their destructive habits is unclear. Depending on the player, this impulse may become too strong to contain, and the devil will appear to Neptune.

- **Venus (♀):**

  "When someone rigs it from the start, and then says 'try your best!' doesn't that make you mad? Doesn't that make you so inconsolably mad you never want to try at all?"

  The excruciatingly shy wallflower with a gentle, understanding smile. Venus is a massive pushover, something his friends find both endearing and exasperating. To make matters worse, he has trouble discerning when people are lying to him, rendering him extremely vulnerable towards the camp's bullies. As a result, he's built a victim complex upon a foundation of righteous resentment. This dark emotion runs deep, deeper than most people realize, and rarely rears its head. Due to his timidity, it's easy for Venus to get left behind despite having some of the deepest insights out of the entire cast. He's also talented at using/fixing the radios, implying he has a stronger connection to the supernatural than the other girls. Yet even god cannot save Venus if the devil decides to take him.

Breakdown

We Know the Devil is the quintessential indie game experience. From the $6.66 price tag to its evocative title, it's clear that *WKTD* prioritizes tongue-in-cheek humor and grimy aesthetics over capitulating to the popular market. The game continues this theme by making no effort to hold the player's hand, instead dumping them *in media res* and blasting them with Alec Lambert's dissonant, noisy, and sometimes unpleasant soundtrack. Each character looks like a sketch ripped from a high school notebook, superimposed upon photographs of creepy forests and abandoned cabins taken by a disposable camera. It's off-putting, surreal, and relentlessly charming.

However, without their ties to the narrative, these elements do not stand on their own as pieces of groundbreaking media. Tons of other indie games have beautiful art and outstanding soundtracks. WKTD's narrative distinguishes itself by eliminating the player character, and by intertwining its choice-system mechanic with its thematic argument — you cannot be "good" or "bad" in this game, you can only be true to your choices.

Within the visual novel genre in particular, mechanics tend to take a backseat to narrative. *WKTD* is no exception to this convention. Gameplay usually consists of clicking through several screens of dialogue before being presented with a "choice" that affects the plot's direction. Not especially interesting, especially in today's age of games where "*Dark Soulsian gameplay*" is an entire genre unto itself. So, in order to keep the player's attention, visual novels must compensate with excellent writing and characters. Whereas most visual novels introduce a milquetoast player insert, the avatar's role in *WKTD* is practically nonexistent. Instead of choosing dialogue options, the player chooses which two characters will hang out with each other. This causes a route-specific scene to play, limited to interactions between those two characters, and encourages multiple branching playthroughs in order to see every single possible conversation. By removing the player avatar, the onus is instead upon Neptune, Jupiter, and Venus to coax the player into emotional investment. It's a bold move on the writer's part, one that places a lot of faith on the game's narrative integrity. However, it works within *WKTD's* context.

In games predicated around a branching plotline (think *Life is Strange*, or *The Walking Dead*), choices are often affected by the player's desire to "win" the game by choosing the "correct" dialogue options that will lead them to the best ending. Thus, the writers often take away player agency by coding one dialogue option to feel "better" out of the two. If players want an alternate choice, it often feels like the writer punishes the player for choosing the "bad" option. Therefore, by eliminating the middleman avatar, the player feels no pressure to choose one option over the other. This places agency back into their hands and allows for a truly player-driven experience without the writer's meta-gaming. As an added bonus, the player also spends less time worrying about their own choices and more time understanding the cast's motivations. It's less about getting the "good" or "bad" ending, because in *WKTD*, every ending is a "bad" ending. No matter who you choose, someone is always possessed by the devil in a horrific fashion.

But what does it mean to be possessed by the devil?

"The devil is weak and humans are strong, and that is the way it has always been. Even a kid can kill the devil. All she has to do is try."

That's the key word: *try*. *WKTD* centers around themes of isolation, repression, and trauma. Within each of the three characters is another self, their true selves, that they repress for fear of rejection from the other two. The devil is a metaphor for giving into desire, for unleashing queerness and weirdness and becoming vulnerable to your closest friends, even if it's just for one summer night. When Jupiter is possessed, she becomes a storm of hands, grasping for affection, aching to be held. When Neptune is possessed, she oozes black bile that sticks to everyone and everything. When Venus is possessed, he reveals himself as a seraphim covered in glowing eyes, seeing the world with unclouded vision and begging for someone to see her too. The goal of *WKTD* isn't to "be good" or "be bad". In a game about people and relationships, there is no

"winning". In fact, the closest you can come to winning is by playing through all three routes, then balancing your decisions so nobody gets left behind. That unlocks the true ending, where all three get possessed by the devil and accept each other when no one else will. "Winning" the game means losing all three of the characters, but maybe they're better off that way.

Strongest Element

The strongest element of *WKTD* is Aevee Bee's writing style. She knows how to write teenagers; each line of dialogue sounds like a tweet, only that tweet is written by a poet laureate on their second bottle of wine. While she doesn't hold herself to strict grammar rules (Neptune often yells "*GODDDDD*" when she's annoyed by the conversation), she writes with artifice. Nothing is wasted, the plot never drags, and the characters' quirky humor lands with aplomb. While visual novels have a lot in common with books, the audience and their habits are fundamentally different. Gamers are less likely to strain their patience if the game takes too long to get to the point or capture their interest. *WKTD* knows this, and wastes no time with exposition or over explanation. Because visual novels have the advantage of graphics, most of the content is dialogue between characters, and the pace flows like a conversation rather than a textbook.

Unsuccessful Element

However, there have been multiple complaints about *WKTD's* commitment to surrealism. Because game audiences are so used to loredumping and clunky exposition, many reviews were frustrated with the lack of explanation Bee gave about the supernatural elements. While many think this worked in the game's favor, the opposition was vocal enough to warrant some examination. One aspect that people cited many times were the radios. They are described in some scenes as "long and spindly", but aside from that, there is no further description. This proved to be distracting enough that some people put the game down.

Highlight

The reveal of each "devil" for the various characters struck a nerve each time they were revealed, but nothing left an emotional impact like the "true ending". Finally seeing all three characters accept each other in their devil-forms felt like a real triumph. I realized that the previous endings, while sad, weren't necessarily "bad" endings, each of the girls just lacked something that the other could give. By finally choosing to shed their defenses, I felt as if I had been transformed alongside them, something a video game had never made me feel before. Games are usually entertaining, but rarely are they heartbreaking. For me, the highlight was the emotional satisfaction of seeing three people I cared about finally come into their own, reliving a magical coming-of-age that soothed my own insecurities.

Critical Reception

Because of *WKTD's* indie status, there aren't many critical reviews to glean information from. However, these are the few of note I found.
- **Isz Janeway, Feministing** — "This is a work of emotional maturity about three kids without much of their own. It's possible to see yourself in every character but each one is so different and embodies such a different experience and frame of mind. They all have

depth so far beyond what they are on paper. It's not about what they are, rather it's about how what they are shapes their reality due to being forced to comply with something that isn't them… When we talk about media and its potential to hold a mirror up to us and to hard painful truths about us, about communities and relationships and queers and women, I truly believe this will be one of the examples we bring up for some time to come — if we don't let it slip past us. If we don't push it away like a third wheel."

- **Leigh Alexander, Offworld** — "What the game excels at, though, is creating unique, believable characters that make just the right canvas for "shipping" with one another or other visual novel characters, or for doing fanfic and fanart about (and from what I've seen on social media, people are already doing this)."
- **Gita Jackson, Giantbomb** — "It's a short visual novel that I immediately played five times over--once to get the ending for each character, and then the secret ending twice in a row. If We Know the Devil is trying to say anything, it's that you deserve to love yourself. There's nothing wrong with you. The things you think make you weird or unlovable actually make you more powerful than everyone that puts you down. The Devil loves you, and He won't abandon you, and the curse He gave you was actually a gift."

Lessons

- **An emotionally compelling game narrative can exist without a player insert**
  A writer's intention and a player's will are often like an immovable object vs. an unstoppable force. A narrative game can't exist without a story structure, but must also account for interactivity. By doing away with the avatar altogether and putting the player directly in charge of the course of the plot, a game can do away with ludonarrative dissonance altogether, just like *WKTD* did.
- **Minimalism in storytelling is both a blessing and a curse**
  While minimal explanation lent *We Know the Devil* a surreal element, many players disliked the lack of description and found it off-putting. Other games do minimalism well by either having a sparse artstyle or a silent protagonist, etc. But minimalism only works when it's contrasted against enough content to satisfy the player.
- **Know which character tropes your audience likes**
  We Know the Devil is an explicitly queer game for a young queer audience, developed by two queer women. As a result, they drew upon tropes that would resonate with their target demographic. They also allude to media that the audience would have literacy in, such as *Sailor Moon, Harry Potter,* and 80s horror. While niche examples like this might not work with larger scale games, there's still a lesson to be learned about providing the audience with cultural touchstones in a completely original game.

Summation

We Know the Devil is visually, sonically, and narratively unforgettable, with a devastating message at its core. But despite its strange atmosphere, it's a game about acceptance, about welcoming everyone with open arms.

We chose to be distant from her.
And the devil only ever gets one moment.
Our radios scream and crash against her and the devil is destroyed.