Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Yume Nikki (Dream Diary)
Platform: PC
Genre: RPG/Adventure
Release Date: 2004
Developer: Kikiyama
Publisher: Playism
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Kikiyama

Overview

In Yume Nikki, a young girl named Madotsuki sits in her apartment room with only a defective TV, a video game called NASU, her dream diary sitting on a dimly lit desk, and the comfort of her soft bed. Refusing to leave her room, her one window to the outside world is her balcony. However, the boundaries of her inner world -- her dreams -- are limitless. Within her dreams lie many worlds which seem to reflect a part of Madotsuki's waking life. Some worlds drown Madotsuki in a plethora of strange paraphernalia of nonsense, and in others, only the cold, unending rain embraces her. Residing in these worlds are a slew of colorful (and sometimes monochromatic) characters who pay her no mind.

There is not much to Yume Nikki. The author of the game establishes no story and leaves no explanation as to who Madotsuki is, nor what the significance is of anything else. Because of this, fans of the game have taken to creating their own narratives of the dreamer and her dream, ultimately spinning a tale of loneliness and tragedy.

Characters

Madotsuki, Monoe, and Monoko are the only characters named in the game. All other characters listed here are referred by their unofficial, fan-created names.

Madotsuki is the silent protagonist of the game. In her sleep, she can explore her dreams and interact with other characters. Not much is known about her, except that she refuses to leave her apartment and prefers to sleep or play her video game, NASU.

"Toriningen" are bird-like female characters which roam around certain worlds peacefully, and chase Madotsuki when attacked by a weapon or in certain environments.

"Poniko" is a blonde girl who lives in a small house in the Pink Sea. When switching on and off the lights in her house, she can turn into the monster "**Uboa**".

"Uboa" is a monster that resembles somewhat of warped comedy and tragedy masks. When switching on and off the lights in Poniko's house, Poniko can turn into Uboa.

Monoko is a monochromatic girl who, when interacted with the Traffic Light, will morph into a monster with a wounded stomach, a melting mouth and eyes, and five arms. She can be found in the White Desert.

Monoe is a long black-haired monochromatic girl who permanently has a smile. Like Monoko, she can be seen in the White Desert.

"KyuuKyuu-kyun" is a large multi-colored worm or blob creature that can be found rubbing the handrail of a stairway in the Numbers World.

"Seccom Masada" is a googly-eyed tall creature who plays the piano; apparently the pilot of a spaceship. His name comes from a portmanteau of "Sentimental Komuro Michael Sakamoto Dada-sensei".

"Shitai-san" is a man who is implied to have been a car accident victim. His corpse can be seen on a long winding road in the Dense Woods.

"Jellyfish" are red, jellyfish-like plant beings in the Dense Woods. When interacted with, they emit a wind chime-like sound.

Breakdown

The Story…?

Yume Nikki, at its core, is a wordless surreal psychological horror. A narrative is seemingly nowhere to be seen, and there is no dialogue. The game's official page even states, "[t]here are no particular goals nor story of which to speak." [1] Although Yume Nikki does not follow the conventional rules of storytelling, the game's open-ended interactions with other characters and imagery the player can experience have allowed them to project themselves onto Madotsuki and her experiences and create their own interpretations of the game. A major theme within Yume Nikki tends to be isolation, concluded using interactions and certain characters as evidence (which will be explained more in-depth later).

By piecing together lore and possible ways to look at the game not only as an art exhibit, players oftentimes spin a tragic story of trauma, loneliness and alienation.

Game Functions

When Madotsuki falls asleep, she awakes in the dream version of her room, which is nearly the same as the real world. Her game console is gone. Outside of her balcony, sunlight shines rather than the dreary night moon. As she exits the door of her apartment she arrives in **"The Nexus"**[1]. The Nexus is a circular hub of twelve decorated doors leading to one main world. Each of the main worlds lead to smaller worlds, eventually connecting to each other like a web. These doors lead to a vast number of strange worlds, including an eccentric dance club of neon creatures, a snowy wonderland, massive building blocks, vast nothingness, and more.

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[1] The Nexus is a fan-made name for the room of twelve doors. It may also be called the "Hub/Room of Doors".

The Nexus literally opens doors to interpretations, but how does everything connect to Madotsuki? The content of her dreams provide fuel for theories, no matter if it is a character, a structure, or an entire dream world itself. [6] Though there's no time limit to how long Madotsuki can stay in her dream, the player can have Madotsuki force herself to wake up in her room/in reality at any point by pressing a key. The game utilizes a cycle of dreaming and waking up to explore unaccessed worlds and events that can happen by rare chance.

In order to reach the ending of Yume Nikki, one must collect 24 items called "Effects", which can be gathered by interacting with certain NPCs or objects in the dream world. These Effects contain the only dialogue in the game, which is an explanation of what it is in the menu. For example, the Traffic Light Effect's description is "Change into a traffic light." Many NPCs and environments will react to certain Effects when equipped, but not all Effects will affect Madotsuki's dream world. In fact, a large number of them seem to be cosmetic. None of the Effects impact the game narrative. The purpose of these Effects in relation to who Madotsuki is could point to several interpretations, which will be discussed later in this review.

Oftentimes, interacting with anything is a decision that might end with frustration, as not every NPC or environment will respond to what the player chooses to interact with. Moreover, Madotsuki is a completely silent character (though she speaks through gestures by shaking her head when interacting with her bedroom door in reality). The player is capable of enjoying the game without interacting with anything and simply walking around to take in the view.

Themes and Interpretations

Due to the nature of dreams and the lack of explanation, players of the game tend to create theories surrounding Madotsuki, her dreams, worlds, and characters, weaving together a story. Yume Nikki becomes a vehicle for storytelling and a projection of the player themselves.

Self-image
Several cosmetic Effects may represent Madotsuki's perception of self-image, which seems distorted and unconfident. These Effects have no bearing on NPCs.

There is a triad of Effects which simply change Madotsuki's hair: The Long Hair, The Poop Hair, and Blonde Hair Effects. The Long Hair may be Madotsuki without her hair tied up in braids, but Poop Hair may represent how she feels about her hair - brown, and dull. When activating the Poop Hair Effect, flies can be left in locations as landmarks, perhaps signifying her disgust for her own hair. The Blonde Hair Effect may be Madotsuki's preferred hair, as it is long and flowing, and similar to Poniko's hair, which is a light blonde color. This could represent jealousy over features Madotsuki literally only dreams of having.

The Midget and Fatten Effects might also be representations of Madotsuki's body image. The Midget Effect transforms Madotsuki into a smaller version of herself and can spawn multiple versions of herself to travel as a group. The Fatten Effect turns Madotsuki fatter and makes her stomach grumble. Consequently, she may feel like she is too short and overweight. This is in contrast to the Toriningen, who are remarkably taller and slimmer than Madotsuki, and could represent Madotsuki's rivals or bullies as they chase and attack her.

While not changing Madotsuki's physical attributes aside from her clothes, the Witch Effect may also relate to how she sees herself. When traveling deeper into the dream to an isolated island, the Witch Effect be found. As witches tended to be ugly in traditional fairy tales, Madotsuki may feel the same way. Witches were shunned and often isolated themselves from society, so Madotsuki may have felt too self-conscious about her body and others' opinions and isolated herself in her room as well. This isolation manifests itself in other parts of the dream.

Isolation and Helplessness
Madotsuki is seemingly the only person who lives in her apartment, as there is no trace of any other people living in it. There is only one pair of shoes on the balcony, which match the color of Madotsuki's footwear on her game sprite. The waking world isn't the only place she is alone.

Madotsuki's dream has an overwhelming amount of locations where she is isolated, even when there are other characters. There are also many worlds in which Madotsuki is not the singular living thing there, but everything ignores her. Isolation and helplessness is a punishment given by the game. Being apprehended by provoked or "lunatic" Toriningen will result in Madotsuki being transported to an inescapable area, almost like a jail cell, and will force the player to make Madotsuki wake up.

In the Wilderness, Madotsuki can encounter a scene in which tame Toriningen are having a picnic and blasting music. Madotsuki cannot interact with them. She is stuck watching them enjoy themselves as she is blocked off from the party by vegetation, unacknowledged and overwhelmingly lonely.

After meeting Seccom Masada on his spaceship, there is a chance the spaceship can crash on Mars. The only way forward is to keep going through the barren planet alone. Being the only person on an alien planet in a dream may represent Madotsuki feeling out of place in the real world. Here, the player can encounter a large one-legged creature that weeps red tears near a wreckage. This creature, hidden in this small space, might represent Madotsuki's helplessness being trapped in her apartment. This could be extended to her seeing herself as a lonely alien, a strange creature much different than other humans, crying and yearning for contact.

Poniko lives in the Pink Sea and is the only NPC that resides in that area. Her side-eyed expression implies that she does not want to have anything to do with Madotsuki. By chance, when switching on and off the lights, Poniko and her house will warp into a frightening monster, Uboa, whose face conveys seemingly both sadness and happiness.

Once Poniko has transformed into Uboa, Madotsuki can no longer leave the room. Uboa will then transport Madotsuki to a sea of white fluid where a massive disfigured creature vomiting blood will appear and prevent Madotsuki from escaping (aside from waking up). As to who Poniko is, she could be a symbol of mistrust, with Uboa's half-comedic/half-tragic appearance representing two-sidedness. [2] This might mean Madotsuki feels alienated by Poniko (or what she may represent in the real world) and may feel helpless stuck in a situation with her. The shocking imagery and helplessness lends itself to several sexual trauma interpretations.
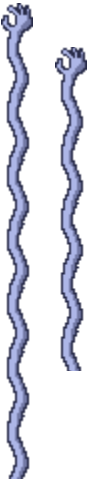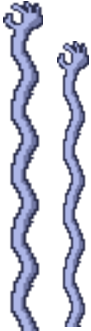

Sexual Trauma
There are many images that are implicitly sexual in nature, adding fuel to a popular theory that Madotsuki has experienced some kind of sexual trauma. [2]

KyuuKyuu-kun, the neon blob creature, has been theorized to be a phallic symbol, as it is only accessible by entering a passageway represented by a zipper in the Numbers World.

Moreover, many locations in Madotsuki's dreamworld have body parts, such as dismembered grabbing hands, eyes, and fetus-like creatures and representations. Some examples are the flying balloon-like creature that resembles the TRAP Syndrome birth defect, and a colorful organic creature that serves as the background for the Graffiti World, which interestingly has the same palette as KyuuKyuu-kun. In certain parts of the game, cyclops creatures with pregnant bellies can be seen. Achieving the endgame involves unequipping Effects in the form of laying distinct colorful eggs, giving Madotsuki a direct representation of birth/motherhood.

Combining all these images and representations, we can see that Madotsuki had been a victim of sexual assault and refuses to leave her room because of this traumatic experience.

Death

A consistent theme within the game is death, in the form of killing and suicide. Two characters, Shitai-san and Monoko, are implied to have been involved in some kind of traffic accident. Shitai-san can be found barely clinging on to life, run over in the middle of the Highway. He is also the method of which the Stoplight Effect is collected, which when used, can change the character Monoko's form in the White Desert. Monoko's figure is horrifically distorted with limbs sticking out her head and limbs resembling a traffic accident victim. Perhaps Madotsuki was involved in a traffic accident, possibly a representation of recurring dreams and memories due to the event. [2]

Some may say that Madotsuki is inherently a violent human, where with the Knife Effect equip, she can choose to attack NPCs which can kill them and cause Toriningen to chase Madotsuki and attack her. The Severed Head Effect can be obtained by interacting with a guillotine surrounded by hostile Toriningen, possibly implying suicidal thoughts and actions on the part of Madotsuki.

There is much more imagery which implies death, but the ending itself becomes a pivotal point in both the game's themes and "story".

After collecting all 24 Effects, the player can achieve an endgame if they so choose. This particular event is the only concrete narrative given. Once all 24 Effects are unequipped in the Nexus in the form of eggs, the player can wake up Madotsuki to return to the real world. Nothing has changed, except for outside on the balcony where a staircase that wasn't there before waits. The player can choose not to interact with it, return to the bedroom, and continue to dream.

But if or when the player interacts with the staircase, Madotsuki will climb it and pause for a few seconds, allowing the player to wonder what will happen. Suddenly, Madotsuki will jump off the balcony and fall.

The scene fades out. A thud. A void and splattered blood fades into view.

Madotsuki is dead... *Or is she?*

A recognizable chime rings. Slowly, two creatures emerge from the darkness: the Jellyfish. Is Madotsuki still in a dream? Yume Nikki's conclusion only opens itself to interpretations as to who Madotsuki is and the importance of her dreamworld. Ultimately, the player can only assume that the cycle of dreaming and sleeping will continue forever.

Strongest Element

The strongest element which drives the interpretations of the plot in Yume Nikki is its environments. The game utilizes environmental storytelling to tell a story without words. Utilizing the items which Madotsuki can transform into or wear can affect the environment and those that reside in it. It is clear that Madotsuki feels lonely when looking at all of the elements of the game and how she (mis)fits within the environments. The environments and their contents provide the incentive for interpretation on who the character is and why she is there, even with the absence of direct explanation.

Unsuccessful Element

The lack of confirmation of what is going on in Yume Nikki can be what turns people off from picking up or continuing the game. While interpretation can be a driving force in interest, open-endedness is inevitably something not everyone might enjoy. With the lack of a concrete overarching story, some players may feel like they are not working towards a set goal.

Highlight

Even after the arduous task of wandering worlds and collecting Effects, Madotsuki discards all the Effects in the Nexus, wakes up, and leaps to her death. Was it worth collecting everything, just for it to end so easily?

The appearance of the Jellyfish begs the question: "Was Madotsuki dreaming all along?" The juxtaposition of what seems to be real life and dream in the game leads to endless interpretations and theorizing by the game's audience in order to understand what Yume Nikki might mean. The game can be interpreted differently by each player, due to player projection or analytical literary means, so Yume Nikki has the potential to tell millions of stories.

Critical Reception

Criticism on Yume Nikki is often mixed, especially due to the abstraction of the majority of the game. The most common takeaway is that Yume Nikki is simply a walking simulator within surreal environments, but the underlying sense of unease and isolation pervades the atmosphere.

"Many of the dream worlds lack a real sense of direction and it's easy to wander about aimlessly until something happens. The background music accompanying these worlds are all short, repetitive tunes (some are just two-second loops) or ambient sounds. It's like the feeling of being stuck in the same place for copious amounts of time, building up a feeling of insanity." **- 8/10, Breaking Canon [3]**

"Yume Nikki is not just an abstract walking simulator: it's a dream. And in dreams, everything has a meaning." **- Giada Zavarise (PC Gamer) [4]**

"The main feelings *Yume Nikki* evokes are a strange sense of dread and horrible, overarching *loneliness*. Despite the game having hundreds of NPCs, only a few interact with you in any way." **- TheEdge.com [5]**

Lessons

- **Having dialogue in a game is never a requirement in order to tell a compelling story.** From start to end, Yume Nikki's only "dialogue" is descriptions of Effects which only serve as a simple explanation of the item. "Show, don't tell" is an inexplicably important part of compelling storytelling, and Yume Nikki exemplifies and perhaps even exaggerates this. Characterization can be shown through interactions, environments, and items.
Through Madotsuki and her Effects, a glimpse of her personality can be seen. Yume Nikki's environments, though unexplained as to how they are related to Madotsuki personally, point to Madotsuki being lonesome and alien in a world that she is familiar with. Environmental detail is very crucial when dialogue lacks, and is just as powerful as it is a universal visual language. Likewise, without dialogue, the story can be understood by anyone regardless of spoken language, and they can come up with their own conclusion of the game.

- **The power of interpretation can impact and even enhance the overall game.** In the end, Yume Nikki might not even mean anything. It could just be a surreal adventure in the mind of Madotsuki, and by extension the creator Kikiyama. Nonetheless it is as powerful as a game with a set plot, characters, interactions, and open-endedness. How a player can interpret the apparent symbolism and events can affect the way the player perceives the entire product as a tale of tragedy or hope, perhaps through the projection of themselves through Madotsuki, or their interest in the game.

- **A linear path, or a path at all, is not needed to tell a story.** All effects can be collected in any order, and all events can be re-experienced any number of times. The sequence of the game can vary from player to player, and adds variety and replay value to gameplay. For game designers, this can be an advantage in terms of less production and planning time, in order to give more way for other assets.

Summation

Though Yume Nikki has absolutely no concrete story established nor any dialogue, its completely silent character still speaks volumes as to who she may be because of how she interacts with her dream world. The nature of the dream is ambiguous on what happens to Madotsuki in the ending, but the player's narrative of Yume Nikki, whether it be a story of tragedy and abandonment, or hope and emancipation, is completely up to them.

Citations

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