

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Tetris Effect
Platform: Xbox One/PS4/PSVR/PC
Genre: Puzzle
Release Date: November 9th, 2018
Developer: Resonair, Monstars, Stage Games
Publisher: Enhance, Sony Interactive Entertainment
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Tetsuya Mizuguchi

Overview

Tetris Effect takes the player on a journey of self-discovery and edification, whilst also simultaneously working to ease and elevate your mental anxieties as you progress through the game. The narrative is primarily told through the lyrics of the songs played within each level but is reinforced by the gameplay throughout the adventure mode.

The story told is one of understanding the world we are born into, transcending the reality of the now to appreciate the bonds between all of humanity, and the beauty of life big and small; all of which we are lucky to experience due to the miracle of our existence.

Characters

(Break out a list of the major characters/factions, and, if necessary, important minor ones. Formatting should be as follows:

- **Player** – You. The game speaks directly to you as the player to tell its story. Through the potentially difficult gameplay and the gorgeous audiovisual treat that is every inch of art in this game, you are meant to have a transcendent experience that makes you an active participant and character in the game.
- **The Game** – From the beginning of adventure mode the game takes an active role in addressing those who play it. Through its music it attempts to commune directly with the player to posit comforting support or a revelation it wishes to share. With both its visuals and music, it attempts to challenge you to mimic the struggle of life and urge you to find the strength to continue on always.

Breakdown

The story of *Tetris Effect* begins with the first level named “The Deep” in which you as the player find yourself deep on the ocean floor. The game lets you get your bearings as you begin to piece together how this new world you find yourself in functions. Blocks of different shapes drop from the top of the game screen very slowly, and each time the player moves them left or right a note plays that harmonizes to the music. You begin moving blocks in a flow with the music to try and create a row of blocks as the only goal you are given is to clear several lines. As each line of blocks is cleared the game chimes pleasantly to assure you of your success. After you’ve cleared a few lines the first of several song lyrics chimes in to give you the first insight to the narrative of the game.

“I’m yours forever / There is no end in sight for us / Nothing could measure / The kind of strength inside our hearts / It’s all connected / We’re all together in this life / Don’t you forget it / We’re all connected in this life” [1]

The game wants you to know that whatever comes in this adventure that you have embarked on take heed, you are not alone. We are all connected in this life and in our own struggles. Take heart, and carry on, for nothing can stop you with all the strength of love in your heart.

Despite being a single player game *Tetris Effect* wants you to know that you are never alone in this life or in your struggles. It speaks to something ethereal in all of us. Humankind has always been prone to connection. We are hardwired to be social, even if to varying degrees. The lives we live are all connected through our shared humanity and so no matter how daunting the task, we can overcome it together. On this message an image of the Earth appears in the background. This is the world we are born into and we’re lucky for it.

As you proceed through the various levels of the game there aren’t any lyrics for a while. Instead, you are treated to small vignettes of different cultures and lives all over the world. From a busy metropolitan street to an energizing dance around the fire; each of these stories strives to impart the same thing. Despite the differences in our lives, we are all human and our differences make our connection all the stronger, all the more profound. Each of these levels has varying difficulty sometimes spiking to incredible heights or calming lows to match the energy of our lives and this world in all its different moments and settings. Within each of these levels the blocks that descend from the top of the screen ebb and flow with how swiftly they descend.

Eventually the player comes to a point about 70% of the way through the game that elaborates on its theme in a different direction. The player finds themselves in a swarm of hot air balloons that fill the sky. For the first time in a while, lyrics kick in over the music to say:

*“We embark / On this ride / To find out who we are / We look up / To the sky / To find out who we are / We embark / On this ride / To find out who we are / We look up / To the sky
/ To realize / Nothing can stop us / Nothing can stop us / We can touch the sky” [1]*

Rather than addressing the player directly in this sequence, *Tetris Effect* wants to show you what it believes: Humanity striving endlessly to greater heights both physically and mentally. We as a species take on this challenge to find our worth and to try and transcend the boundaries imposed on us. It's a true fact that oft is repeated in many a fiction but humanity is ferociously clever and has an enduring pioneer spirit. We are ever reaching to conquer new frontiers. It's just part of who we are as a species and that indomitable human spirit has served us well. In the short time we've recorded history, comparatively to the planets' existence, we've made unbelievable strides as a species. *Tetris Effect* wants to invoke this sense of wonder in you. It wants you to believe in yourself because you're right there with us. All of us we are part of the same humanity that made tools, conquered the elements, and put a man on the moon. Together, as a species, there is nothing we can't do.

The game repeats this message again in the level just after this within the lyrics:

“We are the light of hope / We're shining like no other / Like diamonds in the rough / We found our world of color / Now we're never going to give it up” [1]

Now at this point in the game each level is consistently challenging. The speed at which blocks drop from the top of the screen gives you but a scant look before dropping. You will struggle and all the while the game is encouraging you at every step that it believes in you. What comes next in the penultimate level of the game is a belief in the next crucial step for humanity, transcendence.

As the game takes you to the stars above our world and reflects on the splendor of this world the lyrics take a moment to address the player with its usual idealism but also posits a tough question:

“From my view / I can see you / I told you / That's it's greater / We are one / We're just some in this universe / All around the Earth / You can find / The stars align / The way they shine / Over all mankind

And all the galaxy / Is one of many / Anyway / So they say / Wanna save me please / Too far to reach / But just a grave / Is what they say / How can we change the world / Change the world overnight / In this game of life / This game of life / How can we take a break / And make a difference tonight / I won't leave you behind / Leave you behind

Live life in the moment / In the time that we have” [1]

Tetris Effect asks how we can possibly change the world we live in. In this moment despite being usually idealistic and entirely consumed by optimism about humanity and our place in the world, the game takes a moment to acknowledge that things aren't as perfect as it wishes it was. We need to change this world and believe in each other, and our connected humanity to create a better more harmonious world. *Tetris Effect* also has an answer to how we can take the first step in creating that world, living your life to the fullest each moment and loving fearlessly.

The final message the game gives to you comes in the form of the very first song of the game, reprised and extended, over the credits, and it reframes part of the message entirely. The lyrics are as such:

*“When you were born / Something changed / My heart could not contain / The miracle /
Of this world / And all that it creates*

*With every passing day / The winds might blow stronger / And carries us away / But we
will hold on to / Joy to light the way / To keep the reminder / That love does not escape*

*I'm yours forever / There is no end in sight for us / Nothing could measure / The kind of
strength inside our hearts / It's all connected / We're all together in this life / Don't you
forget it / We're all connected in this life*

*Beyond the stones and the seas / The sun and the breeze / The stars and the galaxy /
Beyond the time that we take / The days that we make / I'm always gonna to be with you”*

[1]

In this world that can sometimes be endlessly cruel or unkind, and times seem to get tougher, *Tetris Effect* takes on a role of optimism in its purest form, that of a parent addressing the future ahead of their child. Rather than worry, however, it chooses a tone of wonder. It sees the struggle of life and rebuffs it with an intense love for the miracle of this world. It believes so much in the connection of humanity and looks forward to their child seeing with wonder the same world that it loves fervently and it's a love that will never die.

Strongest Element

The strongest element of the narrative throughout the story is without a doubt the narrative's endless optimism. While the game might present you with conflict in the form of consistently harder challenges the tone never wavers. The narrative throughout the game addresses the challenges of life as a matter of course and is always impressed or comforting the player. It knows times can be tough, but there is beauty in the struggle and in the connections, we form in both good times and bad. There's value in stories that take a realistic approach to life and embrace the sadness that is inevitable in all our lives, but there is a greater strength in accepting that sadness and seeing the complexity of life as a

thing of unparalleled beauty. Life is awesome, in the truest sense of the word. We are, all of us, lucky to be living in a gorgeous world with rich minds and love in our hearts. To love freely is rare, and this game loves humanity and life more than any other piece of fiction in the world today.

Unsuccessful Element

Sadly, as optimistic and loving as the narrative feels like it doesn't entirely represent each of the cultures it is trying to highlight as well as it could. The narrative makes a point to specifically mention the blend of cultures all through the world, but it does so in a way that can be almost overly stylish. A more grounded representation of a greater variety of culture would serve its message greater.

Highlight

The peak of the game comes when you least expect it - in the credits. Typically, when credits are rolling there's an inclination to tune out but that's when *Tetris Effect* chooses to hit home as hard as it can. Reframing the first song of the game, which was also the most marketed promotional piece of music, as a parent speaking to their newborn child brings the story from that of an optimistic omnipotent force, to a new parent who is reflecting on how their whole world changed. Few events in life are as stressful as becoming a new parent. It's a terrifying prospect to take on that responsibility, but despite that fear the game comes at it from a different perspective, and one that is incredibly moving. To look upon a new life not in fear but in wonder, and in pure love is a wonderful, and deeply personal, thing and it's shared with all of us. It's an intimate moment beyond description that manages to hit upon the most human part of ourselves without even addressing it.

Critical Reception

Publisher: Giantbomb

Reviewer: Ben Pack

Score: 5/5 Stars

Within his review Ben Pack notes the incredible care with which the entire game was crafted. In regard to the narrative of the game Ben mentions that the Journey mode is an emotional experience and "as cheesy as it sounds, you feel like you're part of something bigger when playing in VR." Both these points speak to the approachable nature of the narrative evoking feelings without being confined the strict traditional norms. [2]

Publisher: The Washington Post

Reviewer: Christopher Byrd

Score: 90/100

Christopher Byrd comments in his review how traversing through the Journey mode of the game states it is “a voyage of emotion and discovery” and notes that within the confines of a VR experience the audio and visuals within each stage helps to deliver. They cite the additional tactile senses of vibration from the controller as well as the audiovisual presentation creates a wholly immersive experience. [3]

Lessons

- Narrative can exist even without being explicitly stated

Despite never having a named character or interaction, and being just a game of Tetris where the gameplay has no story component to it, *Tetris Effect* has a narrative nonetheless. From this game we can learn so much about how just the intertwining of music, emotion, and gameplay can create compelling narratives. While never having a single line of character dialogue, there are endless comments online and off wherein players describe having intense emotional reactions to the message conveyed within the game. In some ways it has a stronger narrative without having traditional story elements than other games have with them.

- Going deep on one feeling can create a deeper emotion

To create a heartfelt scene is hard, and to fill an entire game with said emotions feels like it should become tiring or trite, but instead it's a revelation. Sticking to a specific emotional queue and never relenting can transform an emotion from a more superficial state to incredible heights. *Tetris Effect* could have created numerous songs covering several emotions to emphasize the complexity of the human condition but it knew exactly what it wanted players to feel from playing it and doubled down on its messages of love and optimism relentlessly.

- Using the correct technology can have all of the effect in the world

In several critic responses the use of VR by the developers has been lauded as transcendent of the typical gimmick affair that VR is used for. Knowing that using VR to create a more immersive experience to help create the intimate environment the narrative continually hits on served the game immensely.

Summation

Despite being a completely unconventional product of our medium, *Tetris Effect* deserves further analysis and appreciation for its incredible narrative shaped only by its visuals and music. In its simplicity of delivery, it manages to evoke an amazing array of emotions from all who have the pleasure of playing. *Tetris Effect* challenges us all to love and live

fearlessly, and to exemplify that it presents its case undaunted by cynicism in its delivery. In this way it proves that games as a medium can connect us all, and with that connection anything is possible.

References

- [1] V. Daniels, “‘Tetris effect’ and the power of positivity and culture,” *Medium*, 04-Apr2019. [Online]. Available: <https://vincent-daniels.medium.com/tetris-effect-andthe-power-of-positivity-and-culture-75012fbdb899>. [Accessed: 21-Jan-2022].
- [2] B. Pack, “Tetris Effect Review,” *Giant Bomb*, 15-Nov-2018. [Online]. Available: <https://www.giantbomb.com/reviews/tetris-effect-review/1900-788/>. [Accessed: 21Jan-2022].
- [3] C. Byrd, “Review | 'Tetris' becomes even more addictive in 'Tetris effect',” *The Washington Post*, 14-Jul-2021. [Online]. Available: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2018/11/28/tetris-becomeseven-more-addictive-tetris-effect/>. [Accessed: 21-Jan-2022].