

# Game Narrative Review

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**Game Title:** *The World Ends With You* (abbreviated *TWEWY*)  
**Platform:** Nintendo DS  
**Genre:** Action RPG  
**Release Date:** July 27, 2007 (JP) / April 22, 2008 (NA)  
**Developer:** Square Enix and Jupiter  
**Publisher:** Square Enix  
**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** Sachie Hirano

## Overview

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*The World Ends With You* imagines an alternate plane of reality, called the “Underground”/ “UG”, in which people who died can earn the opportunity to come back to life in the real world (referred to as the “Realground”/ “RG”). To earn this opportunity, the recently deceased have what they value most taken from them as an “entry fee”, allowing them to become “Players” in the week-long “Reapers’ Game”. In this Game, each Player partners up with another Player, and they must complete a mission every day. There to subvert the Players are the Reapers, who make things more difficult for the Players in various ways, such as by summoning enemies called “Noise” for the Players to defeat.

Neku Sakuraba, a rude and closed-off teenager from the Shibuya region of Tokyo, is forced to play the Game for three weeks in a row. In doing so, he learns lessons from the people he has partnered with alongside various people in Shibuya that he has interacted with.

## Characters

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- **Neku Sakuraba** – Initially presented as an antihero, Neku is a stubborn teenage loner who insists that friends are a waste of time and that all he needs to get through the world is himself. This is even shown in Neku’s character design, which has him wearing headphones, representing his desire to block out everyone around him. While this mindset can be considered quite extreme, the game hints that the reason that he developed this mindset was as a defense mechanism after a friend of his passed away. At the end of the game, Neku has become a lot more empathetic, kind-hearted, and open to experiencing the world around him, which is further displayed when Neku discards his headphones.

- **Shiki Misaki** – Neku’s partner in Week 1, Shiki is a talkative, diligent, observant, and kind-hearted teenager. Her entry fee for the Reapers’ Game was her appearance. Instead of looking like herself, Shiki took on the physical appearance of a friend that she admired, Eri. Shiki first thought of this change as a miracle and used it as an excuse to act more like Eri, who Shiki saw as being great in all the ways she thought couldn’t be herself. However, acting this way amplified how negatively she thought of herself and how envious of Eri she was.
- **Daisukenojo “Beat” Bito** – A teenage Player in Week 1 whose entry fee was his sister’s love for him. Beat has a strong desire to look out for the people he loves and a strong sense of right and wrong. However, when paired with his lack of book-smarts, Beat can become impulsive and prone to landing himself in sticky situations.
- **Rhyme Bito** – Beat’s younger sister and partner in Week 1. Rhyme acts as a foil to Beat in being book-smart and calm, often coming up with logical courses of action and giving Beat advice. Rhyme is also kind-hearted and trusting. Even though Beat’s entry fee meant that Rhyme saw him as a stranger, Rhyme treated him as a dear friend, even risking her life for him.
- **Yoshiya “Joshua” Kiryu** – Neku’s partner in Week 2. Like Neku at the beginning of the game, Joshua is cynical and aloof. Joshua is both knowledgeable and quick-witted, but he often displays these traits with a condescending attitude, likely because he seems to enjoy teasing Neku and making him uncomfortable. There’s an air of mystery that surrounds Joshua, as he seems to be capable of using more powerful attacks than a regular Player and because of his extensive knowledge of Shibuya and the Reaper’s Game. This information alludes to his role as Shibuya’s Composer: a powerful being who creates the rules and structure of the Reapers’ Games in Shibuya, who is also capable of bringing Players back to life.
- **Sanae Hanekoma** – An artist who goes by “CAT”, owner of Wildkat Café, and Producer of Shibuya’s Game. His artistic works are popular and are imbued with the message “enjoy the moment more”. As Producer of the Game, he is meant to ensure that both Reapers and Players follow the rules of the Game, and he also keeps in close contact with the Composer. He often gives Neku advice when they bump into each other, with some notable quotes including “Trust your partner,” and “If you want to enjoy life, expand your world. You gotta push your horizons as far out as they’ll go.”
- **Megumi Kitaniji** – Conductor of Shibuya’s Game (second in command to the Composer, he gives orders to Reapers). Megumi is cool-headed and unempathetic, seeming to think of Reapers as numbers more than as people. Megumi loves Shibuya, but this love doesn’t seem related to the people who inhabit Shibuya, as Megumi believes that “all the world’s ills can be traced to individuality”. As second in command to the Composer, Megumi is also shown to display a lot of respect toward the Composer.
- **Sho Minamimoto** – A high-ranking (officer) Reaper who seeks to de-throne the Composer and take the role for himself for unknown reasons. Being full of himself causes him to be extremely uncooperative, often plowing ahead with the plan that benefits him the most, even if it means bringing harm to others. Others

regard Minamimoto as irrational, due to behavior that includes integrating math puns into most of his communications, creating “art” around Shibuya that looks like piles of garbage, and yelling at people through a megaphone that he seems to take everywhere with him. Despite these outward appearances, Minamimoto is also extremely clever and powerful, making him a force to be reckoned with.

## Breakdown

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Looking at the entirety of *TWEWY*, rather than each of the three weeks that Neku is a Player, the story follows a four-act structure that’s centered around Neku’s development. The first act introduces Neku’s personality and the basics of the game’s world to the player. Even though the player may initially find Neku to be someone that they cannot relate to (as he is extremely rude to a character who has done nothing but offer him help), he shares a similarity with the player in not knowing anything about what’s going on around him. This is because Neku’s first entry fee was his memories, and he was also given less information about the Game than Shiki. Because of these factors, Neku essentially experiences Shibuya and the bizarre world of the UG in a way that parallels the player. However, a relatability isn’t established between Neku and the player yet. While the player may seek to make more sense of their surroundings by seeking out other people, Neku seems set on doing things alone. The player’s feelings that they can’t relate to the game’s protagonist continue to build, reaching a peak when Neku is tricked into believing that if he killed his partner, he could get out of the Game.

At this point, Sanae Hanekoma steps in, sets things straight, and offers advice to Neku about working with his partner. Up until now, the player would control Shiki during battle with the DS’s D-pad or ABXY buttons, while controlling Neku on the bottom screen. With enemies on the top and bottom screen sharing an HP bar and with initial enemies being easy to beat, players could use just the bottom screen (or use it while mashing buttons) to avoid the difficulty of learning the battle system. However, Hanekoma changes this battle dynamic by granting a pin that’s capable of unleashing a special attack only if Neku and his partner are “synced”, which requires the player to focus on the top screen more. At this point, enemies also become harder to beat, making it harder to use previous gameplay methods to advance. In this way, the gameplay inherently reiterates the message that Neku needs to learn: it may be uncomfortable, but you’re going to have to learn to work with your partner.

It’s around this time that the seeds for Neku’s change are sown, and the story shifts to the second act. Neku’s character growth defines this act, which takes up the rest of Week 1 and Week 2. Shiki teaches Neku to be kinder, more empathetic, and to be more communicative, and in turn, Neku teaches Shiki to love herself. After this, Neku’s memory is returned and he is forced to play the Game again, as only one Player can come back to life at the end of a Game. Neku’s change of heart is apparent from his new entry fee, which is Shiki, and Neku feels terrible about preventing her from returning to life.

In Week 2, Neku deals with two characters that act as foils to him: his partner, Joshua, and the Reaper who’s overseeing the Game for the week, Minamimoto. Joshua and Neku share misanthropic perspectives, namely the belief that understanding others is impossible. Since Neku’s perspective is still in the process of being changed, he can agree with Joshua’s statements regarding these topics, although Neku’s internal thoughts reveal that he is starting to disconnect from this perspective. The main similarities that

Neku and Minamimoto share come from comparing Minamimoto to Neku as he was at the beginning of the game. These two are both extremely self-centered, rude, and independent, and they see no problem with this, as other traits they possess (like intelligence, power, and cleverness) seem to justify that they could manage just fine on their own. Through seeing parts of himself in other people that were difficult for him to deal with, Neku was implicitly guided towards continuing to change from his old self. This highlights the differences between Neku and his foils: while Neku continues to change, his foils seem to be stuck in their ways.

The third act, the twist, starts with Megumi revealing that Neku had to play the Game again because Joshua did not exist in the UG and was therefore not valid to have as a partner. Neku has another entry fee taken from him: all the other Players. Just when it seems like death is certain for Neku, Beat partners up with him because he couldn't stand to let something so unfair happen. Over the past week, Beat was on the side of the Reapers, as he was trying to figure out how to revive his sister. However, he gave up this position and put his life at risk again by joining Neku. The two are united by the desire to save someone they care about and to return to the RG. Neku takes on Rhyme's role of preventing Beat from being too impulsive, and together, the two plan to overthrow the Composer so that one of them has the power to make everything right again. Given how Neku has changed and how the two share a goal, Neku and Beat have a dynamic as partners that's much more natural than Neku's dynamics with his previous partners.

At the end of the game, Beat and Neku discover that the Composer is more powerful than they thought, and is also someone whom they know: Joshua. Joshua reveals that he killed Neku in the RG so that Neku could be Joshua's proxy in a Game that he was playing for the fate of Shibuya. Joshua believed that Shibuya should be destroyed because its people were "unsuitable", and Joshua had won his Game because Neku survived for three weeks. Rather than destroying Shibuya then, Joshua forced Neku into another Game: whoever won a gunfight would be able to do whatever they wanted with Shibuya. Though feeling betrayed could motivate Neku to shoot, he lowers his weapon. This marks the biggest twist of the act: even while at the height of emotional turmoil, Neku's change in perspective sticks with him and guides his actions.

This ultimately leads to the fourth act, the conclusion, where Neku has returned to the RG and lives a life that's more joyful than it was before, as it's filled with the new friends he made.

## **Strongest Element**

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*TWEWY's* strongest element is how its gameplay parallels Neku's development. *TWEWY's* combat system utilizes both screens to an equal degree. On the bottom screen, the player can control Neku with the DS's stylus, while on the top screen, the player can control his partner with the DS's buttons. This combat system is unlike many others, and so players who are starting the game for the first time will likely struggle with it, mirroring how Neku struggled so much to cooperate with Shiki at first. After playing through Week 1, the player will likely be more familiar with the combat system, like how Neku got used to working with Shiki. This is broken with the introduction of Joshua as a partner. Like how Joshua has a big personality that Neku needs to get used to, Joshua's gameplay style is different than Shiki's and requires the player to readjust. This gameplay loop happens once again when Beat is introduced as a partner. Having the gameplay

parallel Neku's experience with his partners, gradually getting to work in synchronization with them by becoming closer to them, reinforces a common theme of the game that is repeated multiple times: "trust your partner".

## **Unsuccessful Element**

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The Underground/UG is shown to be a separate plane from the Realground/RG. Similar to how religions deal with the matter of the living and the dead, the coexistence of the UG and RG is meant to seem feasible. However, the game portrays a lot of interactions between the UG and RG that can cause the player to lose their suspension of disbelief as they question the feasibility of these planes coexisting. One specific instance of this is with Reaper decals, which are used to explain how Players can interact with stores (which allow stat-boosting items to be bought): there are only certain shops in Shibuya that Players can enter, and they're marked with a Reaper decal. Stores marked with a Reaper decal indicate that being in that store allows a Player to temporarily be perceptible to people in the RG. The game is aware of some of the weirdness that surrounds this specific piece of lore, and it chooses to use it in a playful way that matches the tone of other aspects of the game (like the silly dialogues between characters). For example, Neku and Joshua can't fully investigate a popular ramen shop because every time they enter, they're seen as cutting the line that extends out the door, and promptly asked to leave. However, in seeing these situations in which the dead can directly contact the living, players may find themselves asking more serious questions about what happens when a Player who crosses into the RG is recognized as someone who has died. This issue could be fixed by limiting the methods of direct communication between the UG and RG. However, if fixing the issue this way, the lore explaining some gameplay elements may need to be reworked.

## **Highlight**

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Throughout the game, Neku admires the artist who goes by "CAT". As Neku continues to play the Game, he discovers that someone with the role of Composer is the one who's running the Game (and in doing so, has done many questionable things). After learning this information, Neku's findings continually point to CAT being the Composer. Neku repeatedly acknowledges the possibility, but he tries to convince himself that this isn't the case, as CAT's messages are uplifting and inspiring (which greatly contradicts Neku's experience with the systems of the Reapers' Games). These feelings start to develop about halfway through the story, and they last until the moment Neku is finally going to meet the Composer, which is when he finally accepts that he may have to fight his role model.

Shortly afterward, Joshua reveals himself and how he (the Composer) and Megumi (the Conductor) have been playing a Game for Shibuya's fate, with Joshua believing that the city should be obliterated because the people "weren't suitable". Joshua also reveals that he killed Neku in the RG so that Neku could play for him. Since Neku outlasted Megumi's mission timer, Joshua was considered the winner of this Game. All throughout this reveal, Joshua has the same personality that Neku knows him by: condescending, making light of serious situations... Neku is devastated when told about this, as he thought he found a friend that he could relate to. Instead of acknowledging this

emotional matter, Joshua proposes one last Game for Shibuya's fate. Each of them armed with a pistol, whoever shot the other after a countdown would take the role of Shibuya's Composer and be able to do whatever they wanted with the city. Neku tries to talk to Joshua, but Joshua keeps to his plan, continuing to make light of the situation until he starts counting down. Joshua steadily aims at Neku, while Neku, tear-stricken, lowers his weapon. After Joshua's gunshot, Neku wakes up in the middle of Shibuya, but this time, it's the RG Shibuya.

Joshua didn't stick to his original plan to obliterate Shibuya because Neku's behavior led to a change of heart within him. Part of the reason that Joshua specifically chose Neku to play for him was because of Neku's personality: Neku was cut off from other people and saw no pleasure in interacting with them, he lived in Shibuya but had barely any connections to the area... he both represented some of the ideals that Joshua associated with the "unsuitable" people of Shibuya, while also being seen to mirror some of Joshua's own philosophies during their interactions during Week 2. Despite this, Neku subverted Joshua's expectations as he grew and changed, exponentially... even to the degree that Neku took the advice "trust your partner" into a scenario where he let his life, and everything that he ever knew, be in the hands of Joshua during the duel.

Despite Joshua's treatment of Neku in what could have been his final moments, Neku ends the game with a monologue that's seemingly directed at Joshua, in which Neku says "'Trust your partner' -- and I do. I can't forgive you, but I trust you. You took care of things, right? Otherwise, Shibuya would be gone, and my world with it."

This series of events is the highlight for me because of the twists that occur and the characterization that emerges from it. Tensions continued to rise until the gunfight was over, which kept me on my toes the entire time. With human emotions being so strong, especially after betrayal, part of me expected Neku to act on impulse and get back at Joshua. Another part of me expected to see the game's title become literal, with Joshua winning the gunfight and destroying Shibuya afterward. However, the actual outcome was far more rewarding. Neku's actions show the extent to which he has changed, and his monologue shows how emotionally mature he has become (in being able to separate trust and forgiveness). Additionally, Joshua's actions show that he has also changed. The player is led to believe that Joshua would destroy Shibuya if he won the gunfight, as his behavior shortly before it shows that he did not change. However, Joshua doesn't destroy Shibuya after the duel. The only thing that could exist as a catalyst for this change was Neku's own actions. In seeing one of the most "unsuitable" people in Shibuya transform, Joshua came to believe in the fact that change for the better was possible. This caused Joshua himself to change for the better.

## Critical Reception

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With *TWEWY* challenging many common traits of a JRPG and making full use of the Nintendo DS's features, many reviews focus on these aspects first and think of story and characterization as an afterthought. Some reviewers had a few minor gripes with story elements, such as Neku's characterization, story elements that were initially deemed as being cliché, and/or story being conveyed through many dialog bubbles. However, most reviewers seemed to greatly enjoy the story and often mentioned story elements they enjoyed that were different than other reviewers.

**Mark Bozon of IGN, 9.0/10.0:** Bozon says that the characters suffer from the issue of being “love it or hate it”, due to a lack of audience relatability to the main character and localization “leaving characters feeling a bit on the shallow side”. Additionally, Bozon said that “at times it did feel like we were watching a story, rather than living in it.” However, Bozon also says that “those issues pale in comparison to the rest of the well-crafted story” and that Neku has a nice character arc that makes sense with the game’s societal commentary.

**Neal Chandran of RPGFan, 86/100 overall (83/100 for story):** Chandran’s only criticisms of story elements are that the story feels a bit rushed near its end and that “Neku’s development sometimes seems sudden”. However, he praises how characters bring out different sides of each other, which “[leads] to some of the more interesting moments in the story”, as well as how the story spaces out when new plot elements are introduced. Chandran seems neutral on how characters communicate through dialogue, with characters concisely stating what they need to in a “fairly natural” way.

**Randolph Ramsay of CNET, 9.0/10.0:** Ramsay starts his review by pointing out how many Square Enix conventions this game seems to follow, but then goes on to say *TWEWY* uses these “as a launching pad for a unique experience that is... compelling in its storytelling.” For instance, Ramsey says that many themes explored within the story are “nothing new for a Square Enix game”, but they seem more resonant because they’re coming from characters who live in a similar setting to us. Ramsey believes that “some truly touching moments” come from the sincerity of the characters and the twists that take place in the story.

## Lessons

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- **Having an unlikable protagonist is a risk in that audiences will probably not relate to them; however, their growth can be considered more realistic and rewarding to see.**

Though a common trait for protagonists is for them to be likable and someone whom the audience can sympathize with, *TWEWY* goes against this convention by having Neku as the protagonist. Doing so presents a risk to retaining an audience: if the audience doesn’t like and cannot relate to the protagonist of a story, then unless other elements of the story captivate them, they may stop engaging with the story. Although this risk is partially mitigated through comic relief, with Neku thinking of/saying funny quips, these are often negative and can be seen as reinforcing his unlikable personality. However, by taking the risk of having Neku as the protagonist, *TWEWY* can explore some of the difficulties of growth: getting stuck in one’s own ways, needing to be taught a lesson multiple times for it to stick with you, being tempted to return to one’s old mindsets (especially during moments of intense emotion), et cetera.

In terms of how we grow as people, we often move through different stages of life and meet different people who we learn from and often seek to emulate. The lessons that we take with us depend upon the person that we are when we hear these lessons, which is shaped by the lessons that we were taught in the past. Though *TWEWY* is meant to take place during a shorter period of time, it

is able to replicate some of the same processes of real-life growth in its storytelling by having a protagonist with unlikable character traits. It would be unrealistic for Neku's personality to develop into how it is at the end of the game by only getting through Week 1. Instead, Neku had to begin to change with Shiki's help in order to be more receptive to what other people taught him later on in the game.

- **Challenging common perceptions of a character trope that an audience may relate to can inspire the audience to re-examine themselves.**

At the beginning of the game, Neku fits into the loner character trope, although he may be more outspoken about rejecting help than others within the trope. Regardless, the "loner" character trope is one that teenagers often identify with and/or idolize. With *TWEWY*'s ESRB rating of Teen, many members of the audience may have the same relation to this character trope. However, rather than appealing to the teenage audience by giving them what they expect out of the character trope, *TWEWY* challenges the perceptions surrounding this trope. In Week 1, Shiki doesn't admire Neku's insistence upon being alone, but instead repeatedly gets upset at it, as the two are supposed to be cooperating because of the position that they're in. Since cooperation is specific to the circumstances of the story, it's a less effective method of challenging perceptions about the trope than the other ways in which the game does it. By showing Neku's character growth, you can see Neku smiling more, with a greater enjoyment of life coming out of the lessons he learned from other people and his interactions with the friends he's made. In doing so, *TWEWY* can essentially ask the audience "So, is it still cool to live your life as a loner?" This question is meant to be rhetorical, as one of the game's themes is to expand your horizons in terms of meeting new people, doing new things, going to new places, and so on.

- **Localization can have a huge role in worldbuilding and creating relatable characters.**

A major element in *TWEWY* is the game being "modern". The in-game Shibuya is meant to be recognizable as the real-world Shibuya of 2007, which is when the game was created. Additionally, in-game clothing items represent some of the styles that were popular at the time.

In the North American localization, these two elements are not changed much, which gives players the chance to learn more about a unique part of Tokyo. Joshua even engages Neku in trivia about different aspects of Shibuya, which enables the player to learn more than the general geography and trends of the area.

On the other hand, the in-game text has been changed, with the North American version of the game including slang of the English language and references to popular culture (with examples including "I'm telling you, my pins pwn!" and "These boots were so not made for sewer-walking."). There is debate online around whether these localization choices were effective or not, with some arguing that it provides an unrealistic lens of what people from Japan are like/know about. However, from a story standpoint, there are a few clear benefits to making choosing to localize the game this way. Firstly, it provides familiarity and comic relief to the players, which could make them more likely to be engaged



with the story than a direct translation of the text (which could be less relatable to the audience, as different countries have different cultures and customs that shape people's mindsets, societal views, and the way that they interact with others). Secondly, choosing to use modern slang and references to popular culture in localization reinforces the element of "modernity" that *TWEWY* embraces in its worldbuilding.

## Summation

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In terms of characterization and worldbuilding, *TWEWY* stands out as an RPG in how it chooses to use language, cultural values, trends, and locations in a way that is both playful and extremely similar to modern life. Instead of this modern lens making the game seem mundane, it's able to draw upon the audience's existing knowledge and experiences and help to foster a deeper connection to the game's narrative. Given how I experienced the game as a teenager in times that are similar enough to 2007, I felt like it was important to examine why this game's story resonated with me so much. As time continues to pass, new audiences may find themselves relating to this game less, and therefore the relationship between the audience and the game's narrative may be forever altered.