

# Game Narrative Review

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**Game Title:** Nishan Shaman

**Platform:** Mobile

**Genre:** Rhythm

**Release Date:** July 19, 2018

**Developer:** NExT Studio (Tencent Mobile International Limited)

**Publisher:** Tencent

**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** Sico Feng, Erica Zhang, Cecilia Li, Ling Zhang, Jon Yan, Fencer Zhang\*

\*There is no specific writer/narrative lead listed in the credits of the game, thus I have listed all members of the game design team with the assumption that they all likely contributed to designing the narrative experience

## Overview

*Nishan Shaman* is a short and simplified adaptation of the Manchu legend of Nishan. The game follows her hero's journey through the Underworld to rescue a child's soul. On her journey, she faces obstacles from both the creatures of the subterranean world, the underworld's army forces, and betrayal from her own mentor. The game tells this story through a series of five levels, each with unique environments that Nishan traverses as she ventures deeper underground. With only a few cutscenes and no character voice lines, the story is mainly told through the game's soundtrack and visual design.

## Characters

- Nishan - The silent protagonist of the game's story and the player avatar. While her official title is "the Nishan Shaman" per the legend she belongs to, the game commonly refers to her with just the first part of her title, "Nishan." Sent by the gods to the Manchu people, she preserves and protects her tribe with her divine powers, conjured by the beating of a shaman drum. After a child's soul is seized by evil spirits to the underworld, she is tasked to venture deep below the surface and rescue said child. Per the game's compendium, "[a]ccording to some Northern China tribes, she was the founder of the Shaman religion." Within the game, she is represented by a paper shadow puppet. Her supernatural abilities are manifested in a shield of light around her, which grows stronger and brighter as she successfully deflects enemy projectiles and monsters with her drum.

- Omosi Mama - Nishan's mentor and the Manchu goddess of life. She is noted in the game's Compendium to be "the manifestation of the willow tree," which is said to have been the source of human life in Manchu mythology. She is both the first teacher to Nishan and the final obstacle on the shaman's journey to rescue the soul of a child. The goddess possesses a complex personality that reflects the multifaceted relationship between humanity and nature/the divine (as manifestations of nature). To reflect this, she has three distinct forms within the game: a human, a goddess, and a demon.
- Reindeer Spirit - The divinity that first brings Nishan to the Northern tribe. The Spirit is a one-dimensional character that only appears briefly within the game, but this one dimensionality places the Spirit as an iconic symbol within the story. When Nishan is at her lowest point, it is this Spirit that revives her power and will to fight.
- Boy - A child of the Northern Tribe to which Nishan belongs. After he and the other children break a totem during a game, evil spirits rob his soul and take him deep into the Underworld.

## **Breakdown**

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*Nishan Shaman* has a rather simple narrative structure for its core story, following the typical hero's journey proposed by Joseph Campbell. In fact, *Nishan Shaman* arguably simplifies the complexities of the monomyth, cutting certain steps to fit within the five level limitation. But while the game's story itself may be unremarkable, *Nishan Shaman* is able to truly shine through the techniques it employs to envelop the player in the story's world and events – techniques that only arise through the limitations presented by the rhythm game genre. Because of a lack of a script – save for a few narrated cutscenes and bits of flavor text in-between levels – NExT Studio uses visual, auditory, and especially kinesthetic aspects of rhythm game design to build and support the simple, yet dynamic and powerful narrative. In tracing through each of the five levels of the game, we are better able to see how *Nishan Shaman* uses these elements to carve a specific atmosphere, mood, and step of the hero's journey in each level and across the entire game.

### Introduction to Gameplay

To better understand how NExT Studio designed the narrative experience of *Nishan Shaman*, it is important to first comprehend how the game works. As a rhythm game, *Nishan Shaman*'s gameplay "requires players to keep in time with the rhythm" by having players tap in accordance with a rhythm marker (Wolf). Within the world of Nishan, these rhythm markers are monsters or projectiles that approach and attack the shaman. She deflects these threats by beating against her drum at the moment they make contact with her shield of light. Touch, sound, and sight are thus interconnected with not only each other, but also with the player's and Nishan's narrative progression.

### Act I: Tribe

This first level serves as both an introduction to the game and an introduction to the abilities that Nishan will use to attack and defend. Nishan briefly receives instructions from Omosi Mama on how to best utilize her drum to defend against enemies, paralleling how the player learns the mechanics of the game through the tutorial. Nishan then

embarks on a trial given to her by Omosi Mama to test her abilities; she wanders around the landscape of her home and, with her trusty drum, fends off minor spirits and monsters. The trial lasts around a day, with the environment of the game scene progressing from the verdant morning to the blue darkness of the evening. At the end of Nishan's trial, Omosi Mama grants Nishan a reindeer headdress to mark her achievement as a shaman.

As a part of the exposition level, the music of "Tribe" remains calm and slow, accepting of both Nishan and the player's current capabilities. It also represents the current state of the peace in the land, with powerful belts in the soundtrack creating a sense of flourishing life. This audio, combined with the bright green color scheme of the background, make up the "Ordinary World" of Nishan's story. It also establishes Nishan's starting character as a determined, but young and naive shaman who is unknown to the evils of the world.

### Act II: River

Before the player enters the actual level, they are met with a brief cutscene of the appearance of conflict and Nishan's rise to action. A young child, in play, accidentally damages a Solon pole that protected the village from the harm of evil spirits. The child falls unconscious as evil spirits steal away his soul to the underworld, and his worried parents approach the shaman Nishan for assistance – a "Call to Adventure." Donning her reindeer headdress, Nishan performs a dance within a sacred circle, and she descends below the surface, crossing the threshold and leaving the safety of the bright, ordinary world.

The playable level then begins; Nishan's paper puppet body floats down a tunnel and onto the ground of the subterranean world. The environment is a dark toned blue, distinguishing itself from the brightness "the Ordinary World" as exemplified by the Act I. She is greeted by a raft floating on a river between the entrance and the underworld's main city, and boards it standing as the vehicle leaves the river bank. Deep humming, akin to earthly rumbles, rings in the soundtrack as crystals sprout in the underworld's cave, and Nishan is soon challenged by a variety of fish and serpents springing from and around the river.

Matching with the rising action, the soundtrack's rhythm increases in rapidity in comparison to the previous level. Nishan defends herself against flying fish in rapid succession, sometimes with two attackers approaching her simultaneously on each side. The boat's movement bobs with the tumbles of the beat and shaking river, but the tension still has potential to rise. In fact, as Nishan treads closer to the Underworld city, the creatures of the world become more fantastical; she is no longer in the grounded world of life, but the unknown, abstract world of death – the "Special World" per Campbell's model of the hero's journey. No longer is she attacked by snakes, but by dragons. As the soundtrack reaches its peaks towards the end, with Nishan drawing ever closer to the city of the underworld, giant monstrous fish rise and fall with the singer's voice. The weight of their movement is tangibly experienced by the player as they must hold their finger on both sides of the screen for a final, extended note. Both the music and visual aesthetics evolve to reveal the mystical world of the dead.

Once the river has been crossed, with danger averted, the music fades out, and Nishan enters the gates of the Underworld's central castle in silence.

### Act III: Castle

Nishan reaches the heart of the Underworld, where she knows the child's soul must be trapped. She is immediately attacked by the underworld's skeletal forces; she runs across the city as a barrage of flaming arrows fly in her way, her footsteps matching with the soundtracks's rapid tempo. However, once she makes it halfway through the castle city's outskirts, her confidence grows and her movements calm. After a brief pause, Nishan emerges from her initial panic with strength, unfalteringly walking through the last section of the castle city even while spear-armed monsters and spiked weapons fly towards her. She finally finds the child, but to the player's, and thus Nishan's, shock, the child is trapped by the shaman's mentor, Omosi Mama. Nishan defends herself against her mentor's initial curses, but is unable to prevent her doom as Omosi Mama, now in her goddess form, strikes down Nishan in one final blow. Nishan's paper puppet body is shattered, and her soul, on her last legs, reconstitutes in a distant part of the Underworld.

Act III is a rather linear, but intense segment of *Nishan Shaman* that interestingly simulates a battle scene with a clever usage of rapid tempo and rhythm, even while the animated scene depicts little to no fighting choreography. Compared to the previous two levels, "Castle" rhythm grows far more rapid, with even larger sequences of enemies attacking Nishan at a given time. Combined with the constant movement in the background of the scene, with dancing skeletons and running monsters, "Castle" succeeds in crafting a nerve-wracking atmosphere for its narrative by overstimulating the player through both visuals, audio, and action as they tap to the rhythm.

### Act IV: Sanctuary

Nishan barely rises to her feet in an unknown mountain range, a limbo that is seemingly above the surface while still being within the world of the afterlife. On her last legs, she limps through the scene. Her in-game health bar falls to the lowest tier; one too many blows will strike her down immediately. Even so, the spirits that attack her seem wistful, with their in-game sprites traveling slowly across the screen, tendrils meekly swaying with the flow of air. And yet, there is still hope. In spite of the dreary grayness of the scene with even Nishan's characteristic shield of light growing dim, rock carvings in the background, a representation of Manchu culture and history, begin to glow as Nishan steps by them.

In a scripted cutscene within the level, Nishan falls to her knees and loses her characteristic drum and headdress, a manifestation of her power as a shaman. This loss of her characterization, her role as a shaman, is her "Ordeal," "the central life-or-death crisis, during which [s]he faces [her] greatest fear, confronts this most difficult challenge, and experiences "death" (Voytilla 4). However, the aforementioned glowing carvings lead to one final image – that of a reindeer. The carving steps out from the rock it was found upon, marking the return of the reindeer spirit. The spirit bows its head towards Nishan, and with its power, Nishan's strength is revived. The shaman continues forth

reinvigorated, confident in her own abilities and choices, as she rides across the mountain scenery on the back of the bounding reindeer. The scenery, unlike the rest of the underworld, is now a bright purple, marking a return to the strength and determination that Nishan originally possessed in the Ordinary World while still considering the developments and wisdom that the shaman has acquired. The gameplay continues, the music picks up in pace, and the rhythm markers, now in the form of birds, are confident, iconic, and quick. But Nishan has no trouble defending herself against these enemies. At the end of the level, she reaches her final, true destination: the temple.

“Sanctuary,” through its rise and fall of emotions and confidence, truly encapsulates how *Nishan Shaman* uses its visual, sound, and kinesthetic design to create a dynamic arc. There is, of course, the aforementioned difference in the shape of the rhythm markers that the player must defend themselves more. In correspondence to this, the music also fluctuates between mournful strings in the first half and a strong beat mixed with high-pitched string music in the second; the player’s tapping also changes pace in correspondence to this. Finally, there is the health bar, which changes from frighteningly close to death at the beginning to maximum health at the midway point, which presents a mechanical contrast in how the player must approach the level. These design choices that emphasize contrast encourage the player to feel a personal experience that emulates Nishan’s own arc and change in emotions.

#### Act V: Temple

Within the final bastion of her journey, Nishan treads carefully through the halls. But upon seeing the child’s shadow being chased by a deity of the Underworld, the Shaman begins to rush towards the shadow. In the background, flashes of hellish tortures are indicated in shadows. However, Nishan does not halt until she ends up in the central chamber of the temple, where Omosi Mama resides. This is her “Resurrection,” her “most dangerous meeting with death ... [that] shows that the Hero has maintained and can apply all that [she] has brought back to the Ordinary World” (Voytilla 5). In Nishan and the player’s case, this is the skills and knowledge that they’ve acquired through traveling in the Underworld/playing the game.

Unlike the other levels, Nishan stands still and grounded, her target focused on the goddess before her. The battle begins in a rush of rhythm, projectiles in the shape of paper-doll cut outs flying towards Nishan from all sides. Nishan no longer is passively defending herself, but deflecting certain projectiles back at the grandiose goddess. In the chaos, the structure of the temple breaks down, but Omosi Mama is not phased. She retains her composure, and even approaches Nishan in the process.

It takes persistence, but Nishan is finally able to break through the goddess’s composure. Omosi Mama succumbs to rage, and her calm face is twisted into that of a demon, with bulging eyes and a fanged snarl. The surrounding environment also shifts from a royal gold to a sinister purple, an environmental change that signifies the danger of the Special World. Nishan continues the fight, knowing that in spite of her terrifying appearance, the goddess is growing desperate. The demon’s power is immense, but temporary. With two final beats, Omosi Mama is taken down; she shrieks in rage, collapses, and bursts into a

flock of cranes. The child runs out from behind a pillar to greet Nishan, celebrating her arrival.

Act V takes away the complexities of pauses, health bars, and character movement that is present in the previous levels. It is a simple, straightforward level that fully depends on the player's, and thus Nishan's, skill and persistence to fight Omosi Mama; the camera view no longer moves across a scene, but instead focuses solely on Nishan's objective. With these lack of complexities, the soundtrack is also able to be at the forefront of the experience, consisting of a series of chants interspersed between long sequences of beats. The player feels Nishan's battle against each wave of projectiles, the battle being segmented into stages that must be endured.

The main narrative concludes with a cutscene, where Nishan returns to the village with the child. After this quest, she embarks with her newfound ally, the Reindeer Spirit, to travel and explore the world.

#### Game's Conclusion, and the Secondary Layer of the Narrative

The last shot of the actual game is not actually the conclusion of Act V, but one more cutscene consisting only of white text on a black background, where the team behind *Nishan Shaman* says their final words about the state of the legend of Nishan:

“After thousands of years, the shaman culture of Northern China has faded and is very close to becoming extinct. The legends of Nishan Shaman became precious material for cultural research.”

In these last few lines of text, the game places the presented narrative of Nishan within a larger effort to pass down cultural stories and traditions. A reconsideration of the specific design elements of *Nishan Shaman*'s visual and audio aesthetics allows us to see that the entire adventure of Nishan is being presented to us, the player/viewer, through a second layer, a presentation that combines oral storytelling and shadow puppetry. The few bits of narration is delivered to us through a Manchurian speaker, and furthermore the player feels the narrative through music and drum beats. The audio of *Nishan Shaman* thus acts as an emulation of oral storytelling, the traditional format in which the legend of Nishan has been passed down through generations. In addition, the visual design of the characters and settings takes inspiration from both traditional Manchurian paper cuttings and the Chinese art of shadow puppetry – even as Nishan turns in game, she is revealed to be in the form of a 2D puppet, her entire avatar disappearing into a thin line when she turns midway on the screen. The style of puppetry implies that the entire screen view and interface of *Nishan Shaman* is, to use the words of games scholar Henry Jenkins, a nondiegetic machine action. While the player's actions occur diegetically, with Nishan drumming on screen in response to the player's tapping, and the level assets are conceptually within the diegetic world, the actual visual presentation of the gameplay occurs non-diegetically as the machine translates Nishan's (or the player's) actions within the story to the action of puppets. *Nishan Shaman*, in this way, creates the sense that the game itself is a retelling, a demonstration of the passage of the story through puppetry.

*Nishan Shaman*'s narrative thus does not only act as a standalone narrative, but an act of preservation and passage. The story is not only of Nishan, but of a continued effort to keep cultural tales and storytelling alive.

## **Strongest Element**

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The strongest element of *Nishan Shaman*'s narrative is the multifaceted depiction of the titular antagonist, Omosi Mama, and her betrayal at the center of the game's conflict. Omosi Mama possesses an interesting dichotomy as a goddess of life and founder of the world; while she embodies creation and the positive forces of the world, she also encompasses the opposite. As the game puts it "God has many forms, and ... life and death flowed through God like water." Her betrayal against Nishan, while going against her role as her mentor, fits within the context of her split personality as the goddess of life. And just as her role cannot be bound by a simple category of character, her form cannot be as well. Omosi Mama possesses the greatest amount of distinct appearances out of every character in the game, with three unique sprites. Even while they retain certain characteristics, like wings, antlers, and a feminine appearance, the size and shape language of Omosi Mama's form shifts from humanoid, to large but round and accepting, to clawed, sharpened, and sinister. In Act V, even her attacks, while retaining similar forms and the same mechanics within the game, shift from child-like paper doll cut-outs to deathly curses. Her appearance in the game is a simple visual technique that exemplifies her counterintuitive nature and strengthens *Nishan Shaman*'s depiction of gods as anomalous beings. This depiction reflects humanity's own complex relationship with nature, viewing it as both a source for life/survival and also a source of looming danger.

## **Unsuccessful Element**

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The unfortunate weakness of *Nishan Shaman* is ultimately its brevity, consisting of only 5 levels that make up around half an hour to an hour's worth of gameplay. This constraint prevented the student team under NExT Studio to fully explore the various aspects of the legend of Nishan; more complicated arcs and in-depth world building in the original piece of literature were likely cut out or simplified to fit within the scope of the game. For example, the game's compendium states that, according to the original legend, Nishan first meets various deities when she first descends into the Underworld. These deities then make up the raft that she uses to travel forth. By omitting this part of the original legend, *Nishan Shaman* unfortunately removes an additional aspect of Nishan's character and power – the gods' favor of her. Such an element would have made the final betrayal by Omosi Mama, her initial and previously greatest ally, even more shocking.

## **Highlight**

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There's a moment in the Act V around a minute and twenty seconds into the level, after Omosi Mama transforms into her demonic form, where Nishan is at the edge of victory after persisting through multiple waves of attacks. In this final push, she defends against a series of ribboned curses, which is accompanied by an extended chant in the soundtrack.

And yet, in spite of the barrage, the moment is strangely calm. Unlike previous projectiles, which players deflect with rapid taps, these long curses require the player to hold their finger on the screen in momentary, but relatively long, bouts of time. In doing so, *Nishan Shaman* creates a sense of catharsis amidst the chaos, a reprieve that restores hope and strength to Nishan and the player. This kinesthetic stimulation goes hand-in-hand with the narrative, as Nishan makes her final push and finally gains the upper hand in the fight. Combined with the fantastical singing and a hue shift from dark purple to a bright gold, the game manages to connect the player directly to the arc of the fight; it is the pinnacle example of how *Nishan Shaman* uses the interactive aspects of its rhythm game design to swallow the player into the narrative's emotions.

## Critical Reception

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### Jordan Thompson (TouchArcade) - 5/5

Thompson notes that the game's "limited content still manages to feels [sic] like a complete package with a satisfactory story arc" that also manages to deliver additional education on Manchu culture through the game's compendium, which presents "little life lessons and explanations for various important meanings of Manchurian culture scattered throughout" the game's levels. The Compendium provides another form in which players can engage with Nishan's narrative, as it fully explores the legendary world that Nishan lives in. Within the levels, each narrative beat is emotionally felt, emphasized by the thundering drum and music.

### Giorgio Melani (Multiplayer.it) - 8.2/10

Melani writes that *Nishan Shaman* nicely mixes the rhythm game genre with an action adventure through the exploration and activities that Nishan, as the character, engages in during gameplay. Furthermore, he writes that the narrative of the game is greatly supported by the inclusion of interlude cutscenes, which drive the action of the story. However, *Nishan Shaman*'s "continuous flow," Melani writes, unfortunately comes at the cost of length, with the story ending up a short and "compact experience" that leaves the player with a need to see more.

## Lessons

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- **A game's narrative does not necessarily have to be long and complex to create a powerful story.** In the case of *Nishan Shaman*, the game's briefness allowed the player to focus more on and truly feel the emotional weight of each level, rather than rushing along a narrative. Briefness is also beneficial in that it makes a narrative more accessible to an audience who may not have as much time to spend on games.
- **With that said, briefness is also a limitation that can cut out important or interesting aspects of a larger story.** When adapting a story like NExT studio did with the legend of Nishan, or even when creating an original story, one must consider how to balance the impactful, shocking nature of briefness and also the more lengthy nuances of a story.
- Games occupy a unique space in media in that they can stimulate visual, audio, and kinesthetic senses; these three work together to create a holistic experience



that can envelop a player into the world of the game. Furthermore, in *Nishan Shaman*'s rhythm game format, these senses are directly connected to the player's progression forward in a level. The development of Nishan's skills grow parallel to the player's growth in skills, and the visuals, soundtrack, and tapping mechanics shift as the player goes through intense and calm moments in the story. These aspects allow the player to actually *feel* the narrative arc that Nishan goes through. **Essentially, by utilizing the unique interactivity with vision, sound, and touch characteristic of its rhythm genre, *Nishan Shaman* builds a direct correlation and bond between the player and the diegesis.** So while it may have a classic story form, it introduces a fuller experience of the hero's journey.

## Summation

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*Nishan Shaman* was the NExT Studio's first official game, created at that time with a lead team of only six student game designers. Development only took place over the span of one hundred days – a mere five months. And yet, in spite of these production constraints, *Nishan Shaman* flourished through the five hundred iterations in which it developed, stretching the capabilities of its genre and developing into a distinguished adventure of its own. In fact, by having a relatively small scope, NExT Studio was able to flesh out the game's few mechanics and short narrative to create the maximum emotional effect possible: the lack of dialogue drew focus to the game's environmental storytelling; the short duration made each narrative twist, in spite of their briefness, feel weightful. Thus, *Nishan Shaman* exemplifies how even a small production can create an emotional, tumultuous story by creating clever and efficient connections between a game's audio, visuals, and kinesthetics and the narrative progression.

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