

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: I Was a Teenage Exocolonist

Platform: PlayStation 5, Nintendo Switch, PlayStation 4, Linux, Microsoft Windows, macOS, Mac operating systems

Genre: Indie game, Role-playing video game, Simulation video game, Puzzle

Release Date: August 25, 2022

Developer: Northway Games

Publisher: Finji

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Sarah Northway & Colin Northway

Overview

I Was a Teenage Exocolonist follows Sol, one of the first humans to live and grow up on the planet Vertumna. It uses a large, interconnected narrative to explore figuring out your identity and what it feels like to grow up. The game follows Sol from age ten to twenty, using its setting, a planet wholly different from Earth, to evoke the feeling of childlike wonder and exploration. The theme of growing up and finding your identity is further emphasized as player choices and actions determine Sol's skills and personality and what they can do in the future. Additionally, it uses its interconnected narrative and time-loop trope to explore the feeling of being misunderstood by the adults around you, as Sol can remember events from previous play-throughs, but the adults around them don't take Sol's warnings about the future seriously.

I Was a Teenage Exocolonist starts with the ship Sol was born on flying from Earth, through a wormhole, and crashing onto the planet Vertumna, which becomes the first human

colony in space. As the game progresses, Sol builds relationships with the people around them, learns skills, and goes through many challenges, such as the death of their parents, the rise of an authoritarian leader, and the yearly attacks on the colony by Vertumna's fauna, with each event informing who they'll become by the end of the game.

Characters

Main Character (Sol) – The game's story follows Sol, a bright eyed, blue-haired human who was born on Earth's first colony spaceship, and the player character, from age 10 to 20. Players can name the character, but for the purposes of this review, we'll refer to the character as Sol, which is the default character name. Sol serves as a blank slate for the player, whose choices determine the personality traits, skills, and actions as Sol grows up. Additionally, the player is able to set Sol's gender identity and pronouns, all of which can be changed at any time.

The player is introduced to Sol when they and everyone they know are about to travel through a wormhole to Vertumna, the planet where Sol will grow up. On repeated playthroughs, players will discover that Sol can remember what happened, and new choices are revealed based on events from previous playthroughs.

Dys – Dys is withdrawn, a loner, and a bit awkward around others, though he is incredibly adventurous, always trying to sneak out of the colony and explore Vertumna. He's on the shorter-side and has black hair and a bowl cut. He is one of the kids that Sol grew up with and is Tangent's twin.

Tangent – Studious and prideful Tangent practically grew up with her nose in a science textbook, often uninterested in people who weren't as smart as her. In the beginning she has long white hair, though she adopts a shorter hair style as the game progresses. She is one of the kids that Sol grew up with and is Dys's twin.

Tammy – Shy, but sweet Tammy grew up alongside Sol and the other kids of the colony. She's a caring girl with pink hair and pointy ears. Even though she preferred to stay safely within the bounds of the colony, in the first run through, she is killed in an accident when she is 10.

Anemone – Anemone is an energetic, red-haired girl from the colony who loves sports and is stubbornly loyal to the people around her. When her brother Kom dies in an attack on the colony, she becomes solely focused on protecting its remaining members and is quick to take orders from Lum when the Helios arrive.

Kombucha (Kom) – Anemone's kind, sporty, older brother who coaches the colony's sportsball team and is one of the colony's security officer. He's tall, usually smiling and has short orange hair. Kom's death in a xenofauna attack occurs when Sol is 14 and is an unavoidable event that has significant ramifications for Anemone's character.

Eudicot – The wise, old governor of the colony at the beginning of the game and is respected by everyone for her leadership. Depending on Sol's choices, either dies or is overthrown by Lum when the Helios arrive. She is short, with white hair that she wears in a simple bun.

Lum – Commander Lum became the colony's governor shortly after the Helios arrived. He's brash, quick to anger, and incompetent as a leader, only rising to power because the people above him died when the Helios arrived. He has long brown hair with a blue streak in it, a goatee, and a cape.

Gardners – The Gardeners are the alien race that live on Vertumna, protectively tending it and connected to all life on the planet. They are the ones that coordinated the yearly attacks on the colony, out of a concern that the colony's presence will significantly disrupt Vertumna's ecosystem. Sol has the ability to talk with them and negotiate a peace between them and the colony.

Sym – Sym is a member of the Gardner's, though he is more interested in learning about human culture than destroying the colony. With his help, Sol can negotiate a peace between the Gardners and the colony. He has pink skin, long black hair, and a black robe.

Breakdown

The game eases you into the story, introducing the game's core loop of doing activities, card battles, and small side quests. Every game month, Sol can participate in classes and sports, hang out with friends, and sneak out of the colony's walls to explore the Vertumna's environment, allowing Sol to learn skills and improve their stats. Players can also collect cards representing formative memories for Sol, such as key moments in Sol's relationships with other characters and traumatic moments in Sol's life.

Connecting cards to represent events in Sol's life gives the player the sense that their choices affect who Sol will be and makes them reflect on their progress. These events can be viewed as core memories for Sol and thus influence Sol's identity and available actions in the game. Additionally, how the player got the card also affects whether the card helps or hinders Sol in card battles, with cards that represent a negative time in Sol's life potentially hurting their chances of succeeding in card battles and vice versa. This demonstrates that Sol's failures and traumatic memories impact them just as much as their victories and good memories. Similarly, at the beginning of the game, players start with cards with low values that are connected to Sol's first words and first steps, which are helpful in Sol's early years, but their helpfulness decreases as Sol gains more cards with higher values, demonstrating how more recent events can impact people more and mimicking how real-life memories work.

The game's peaceful beginning is reminiscent of childhood innocence, with Sol and the player not yet aware of the dangers and challenges to come. However, the peaceful nature of the game is shattered less than one game year in when Tammy, Sol's childhood friend,

suddenly dies in an accident. This event is unavoidable on a player's first playthroughs; though it and the game's time-loop mechanic encourages players to replay the game and potentially save Tammy in future playthroughs. The dangers of Vertumna are further exposed at the end of the year when the colony is attacked by Vertumna's fauna (xenofauna), and Sol is forced to hide or confront the xenofauna. Tammy's death and the attack serve to rip away the air of childhood innocence and expose Sol, and thus the player, to the potential dangers of Vertumna and what's at stake.

The game returns to a shaky peace the next year, with the colony's members being on edge and opening up defense training to Sol and their peers. Sol can continue doing normal childhood activities, build friendships with, form crushes on, and eventually start dating their classmates. The player can also choose for Sol to go through puberty if they wish. During this time, Sol can also learn more about how the colony members came together and why they left Earth to come to Vertumna. In this, they are confronted with hard truths, like what it means that they are colonizing Vertumna, and more about the colony's uncomfortable past. These activities, with the exception of the occasional xenofauna battle, mirror the challenges of growing up and grappling with the realization that life is complicated. It also primes the player to think more about the game's politics in the future. It isn't until the end of the second year that the xenofauna attack the colony again, but this time, one of the xenofauna kills Sol's teacher.

It soon becomes apparent that the xenofauna attack will be a yearly occurrence, with a seemingly coordinated attack that happens at the end of each year. Dread for the colony's future is on the rise, with each new attack being more dangerous than the past attacks, and questions arise as to whether the xenofauna are purposefully targeting important areas in the colony. The colony is able to survive the early attacks with minor casualties, such as the death of Sol's teacher; however, it isn't until the end of the fourth year that the xenofauna are successful in destroying the colony's geonics- a part of the colony responsible for producing the colony's food- and, with it, the colony's chances of surviving into the next year without a stable source of food.

The destruction of the geonics increases the pressure that the colony faces, further opening Sol's eyes to the danger of the world. What's perhaps more shocking to Sol is the revelation that feeding the colony has been an ongoing struggle as the crops they brought from Earth haven't been growing, and the adults of the colony have been struggling to find a food source on Vertumna. When confronted by Sol for not telling them and the other kids sooner, Eudicot, the colony's leader, says, "[i]magine being carried for so long, and being upset that your feet could not be cut by the rocks." The story event marks a really interesting moment in Sol's life, as it is when they are confronted with the fact that the adults they have looked up to and trusted their whole life don't have everything figured out and are potentially just as scared as 14-year-old Sol and their classmates. Additionally, the idea that a child's parents are growing up and struggling alongside their child is a scary notion for most children as frequently they see parents as knowing everything.

The mounting panic also pushes Sol and their classmates to grow up even faster, with it unlocking a foraging activity where the children can help search for potential food sources

outside the colony's walls and into areas that were deemed too dangerous for them before. It is also made clear that more help is needed in the colony's geonics. Eurdicot says that "[i]t's time we all step up... for our future." This is significant as, up to this point, Sol was only allowed to do activities related to school, sports, or minor jobs. Therefore, the unlocking of Geonics rebuilding and foraging tasks marks the moment that the colony begins to see Sol and their friends, not as children but as young adults and full members of the community as they are being asked to grow up, take on more adult responsibilities, and provide for the colony to improve its chances of surviving through the year.

The game doesn't ease up on the pressure, taking the time to remind the player of the danger the colony is in through dialogue and some design mechanics like the "Starving" debuff. The "Starving" debuff underscores the situation's urgency by reducing Sol's ability to do more physically intensive tasks, which can affect what Sol can do in story events. Additionally, whether or not Sol goes out on foraging missions has a significant effect on the game's story. If Sol doesn't go on foraging missions or can't find a food source, then members of the colony, including Sol's mother, will die of starvation.

During the yearly xenofauna attack, Sol comes face-to-face with an enormous xenofauna, called a Faceless, that destroys the majority of the colony. This event, directly after the food crisis, can be seen as a point of no return. Any childhood innocence Sol held onto is thoroughly stripped away, as seen through narration if Sol chooses to fight the Faceless, where Kom told Sol to run and hide before they got themselves killed. In response to that order, Sol grips their makeshift weapon and is, to quote Sol's narration, "sick of being told to hide like a child," demonstrating yet another common frustration for young adults. Whether or not Sol is successful in fighting or chooses to hide does not matter, as no matter what decision Sol makes throughout the game, Kom, along with many other colony members, is killed in the attack. Additionally, if Sol is successful in their fight with the Faceless, they are forced to confront the morality of their actions, as, while they are being lauded as a hero, their actions during the fight caused casualties and collateral damage.

By showing the different reactions of the other characters in the game, the game makes an explicit point of questioning the morality of Sol killing the Faceless. Questioning what's right and wrong is an important part of growing up and figuring out your identity, and is something that will be continued throughout the game. The game refuses to let players brush over or forget the impact of their actions. For instance, the game takes the time to beautifully represent the aftermath of the deaths of Kom and Sol's mother. As Sol is a blank slate for the player, the game uses dialogue from and art of the characters around Sol, such as Anemone yelling at people trying to comfort her and Sol's dad kneeling on the ground to hold Sol's dead mother, to show the grief that players can imagine Sol feeling and feel themselves. The game also doesn't shy away from how the fight severely damaged the colony, reducing the activities Sol can do to mourn or help rebuild the infrastructure. The change makes it all the more clear that Sol and their friends are expected to step up and support the colony.

A few months after the attack, a new ship, known as the Heliopause, crashes onto Vertumna, bringing new characters and problems with it. It's revealed that the newcomers (the

Helios) were sent after Sol's colony as they stole equipment to make it to Vertumna. Due to their crash landing, the Helios are unable to make a return trip to Earth, they join the colony, help rebuild the colony, and install one of their members, Lum, as the colony's leader.

While the arrival of the Helios helps prevent the large-scale destruction of the colony, it also makes the colony more militant as the Helios's influence spreads among the colony. The arrival of the Helios sets massive changes in the story into motion, primarily regarding how the colony interacts with Vertumna and its creatures. For example, Kom's death and the arrival of the Helios changed Anemonie's characterization from a happy, sports-loving tomboy to a very militant soldier who almost unthinkingly follows Lum's orders to wage war on the xenofauna. Despite the much needed aid the Helios provide, it's clear that not everyone is thrilled about all the changes the Helios bring. One member, Dys, is particularly disgusted by the Lum's war on Vertumna and begins taking radical actions to thwart them. Additionally, if Sol adventures outside the colony enough times, they can meet and befriend Sym. From Sym, Sol can learn about the Gardners, particularly how the Gardners see Sol's colony as a threat to Vertumna's ecosystem and are responsible for the yearly attacks on the colony. With all this information, it soon becomes clear that Sol has to choose a side to support, representing how many people develop their political identities as teens.

With 37 possible endings, from making peace with the Gardners to transcending space and time completely, every choice Sol makes, whether it's what class they take or who to be friends with, defines their identity. Not only does this add to *I Was a Teenage Exocolonist's* replayability, but the way Sol's hobbies, their trauma, and their friends determine what actions they are capable of taking and shape them into who they are by the end of the game, mimicking how people's pasts and experiences influence what they do and who they are.

Strongest Element

At the end of the first run, it's revealed that Sol can go back in time to the beginning of the game, retain their memories, and restart, able to use their abilities to act on their memories to make new decisions. However, if Sol talks to adults about their ability, they are almost immediately shut down, and the game makes a point of giving the player a card called "Delusions," which greatly hurts the player's chances in card battles. This use of the time-loop mechanic is an incredible way not only to explore how things would turn out if you did them differently, adding an incredible amount of replayability, but also serves to add to the experience of what it's like to grow up, developing your identity through your interactions in the world, yet still being thought of as a kid, with your thoughts and opinions not being taken seriously.

Unsuccessful Element

I Was a Teenage Exocolonist has some incredible stories and plot lines that add a lot to the game's replayability. Many players want to see how all the stories play out, making it all the

more frustrating that it can be extremely difficult to reach certain outcomes. Subsequent runs can take around seven hours to complete, and completionist players can easily spend more than fifty hours completing all the storylines. This makes it all the more frustrating, because reaching certain events can be extremely difficult as the choices required for them are unintuitive. For example, one storyline about repairing the relationship between two prominent characters, Tangent and Dys, is notoriously difficult to start without a guide or hints. To trigger the start of this storyline, players have to participate in an activity a few times that isn't unlocked until the second-to-last game year, which isn't obviously related to either character. It doesn't help that many of the game's stories have events in and wrap up in the final years, meaning that you have to time the events just right to avoid getting halfway through the plot just in time for the game to end.

Issues with unintuitive outcomes also extends towards the choices players can make through dialogue. One example of confusing dialogue occurs early on in the game, when the player can easily assume a comment that ends up hurting Sol's relationship to Dys is a compliment. It can be immensely irritating if a choice is easily misunderstood and heavily penalizes the player, especially because many players play visual novel games to make decisions and expect to receive a logical outcome. Therefore, visual-novel-style game with frequent illogical causes and effects in its dialogue can significantly hurt both the game and its story as it would drive away the game's presumed psychographic, that being, fans of the visual novel genre. This would be a shame, because the overall game has one of the best stories and creates one of the best user experiences that I've seen from a game.

Given that, according to Northway Games, the game has around 800 story events, around 600,000 words, and how interconnected the story is, referred to by its creators as a narrative octopus, it's more than understandable that issues like this would be unavoidable and present for the game's launch. It's a hard problem for a story of this scale to solve, mainly because the game developers would need to first realize that it's an issue for players. Due to that the best solutions being more thorough reviews of the choices and more frequent and diverse playtesting to ensure that the choice a player makes will have the expected outcome. If said playtesting is impossible, either from lack of time or ability, one possible way to fix the issues like this is to allow players to report them. *I Was a Teenage Exocolonist* doesn't have voice acting, meaning that once the issue is reported, the game developers could potentially fix the issue without making major changes to the game. In the case of Dys and Tangent's plot line, unlocking the activity that triggers the plot line earlier in the game and making it. The game developers could also take steps to make the activity seem more connected to the characters. Similarly, in the case of Dys's dialogue, the developers could reword the choice or add some narration that Dys is sensitive to being teased. This fix would help players avoid being penalized for misinterpreting what effect the dialogue would have.

Highlight

While *I Was a Teenage Exocolonist* has a wide variety of choices that will affect Sol's identity, the most powerful moments are the infrequent events that the player has no control

over. One event in particular that changes the course of the game is the arrival of the Helios. The game brilliantly frames this lack of control through the game's politics, with Lum undemocratically seizing control of the colony when the Helios arrive. Like people under 18 in America, Sol had no say in whether Lum took control of the colony. Players who have done multiple playthroughs of the game will know the ripple effects this event causes, and the anguish of not being able to avoid this event mirrors the anguish teenagers often feel about being able to see all the potential devastation of an event while being powerless to avoid it.

Critical Reception

I Was a Teenage Exocolonist was met with overwhelmingly positive reviews, receiving an average critic score of 91/100, according to Metacritic. Noelle Warner from Destructoid praised the game's addictive nature, its meaningful choice-based narrative, and its replayability, saying, "I can't think of a game I've ever played that's made me want to dive immediately into another playthrough right away as much as this one did." Noelle also heavily praised *I Was a Teenage Exocolonist* deck-building mechanic and loved the way the cards represented the core memories Sol forms, calling the game a "hallmark of excellence" and that it was "one of the most touching stories about what it means to be human that I've seen in games." Noelle ended her review by giving *I Was a Teenage Exocolonist* an almost perfect score of 9.5/10.

Similarly, Nathan Birch from WCCFTech lauded the game's "fully fleshed out" cast of characters, its replayability, its coming-of-age story, and how it handles its politics. He gave *I Was a Teenage Exocolonist* a score of 9/10, with his only critiques being that the game wasn't technically impressive and was "a touch wordy," which is a common enough critique of games with similar visual novel-style dialogue.

Lessons

- **Lesson 1: The game's mechanics and narrative should work together to enhance the user experience and emphasize the game's themes.**

I Was a Teenage Exocolonist is able to brilliantly tie their mechanics into the story, making the game's themes and impact so much stronger than they otherwise might have been. The deckbuilding mechanic, paired with the memories Sol forms throughout the game, is a genius way to show the player's journey and have the card battler and story impact one another. It is also a fantastic way to represent how memories work in real life and how they inform our actions, skills, and identities, culminating in an incredibly rich coming-of-age story that emphasizes what it feels like to grow up and be a teenager. Similarly, small additions such as the "Starving" debuff can majorly impact how the story plays out while using a good narrative reason to challenge the player and create a gripping user experience. Additionally, the "Starving" debuff helped emphasize the urgency of the issues in the story.

- **Lesson 2: Video games are capable of exploring complex politics.**

The game's choice-based mechanic and vibrant world allows its players to explore politics in the game and real life. The game confronts topics such as colonialism, capitalism, and cultural assimilation, allowing players to see the outcomes of their choices. By not being heavy-handed in its exploration of politics and touching upon politics in real life, the game also provides a lens that players can use to examine real-life politics.

Summation

I Was a Teenage Exocolonist is a masterclass on how a game's narrative should influence its design and vice versa. It manages to tell an incredibly moving sci-fi story, touch on hard topics respectfully, and use its mechanics to full effect in its exploration of its core themes of growing up and identity. The beautiful thing about this game is how it demonstrates a clear mastery of the medium and the visual novel genre, brilliantly using all the tools at its disposal, from the story, mechanics, artwork, and soundtrack, to fully submerge the player in the world of Vertumna.