

Game Narrative Review

Your name (one name, please): Jeff Chen

Your school: Rochester Institute of Technology

Your email: jc7117@rit.edu

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Game Title: In Stars and Time

Platform: PC / Nintendo Switch / PS4 / PS5

Genre: RPG

Release Date: 2023

Developer: insertdisc5

Publisher: ArmorGames

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Adrienne Bazir

Overview

In Stars and Time (ISAT) is a narrative-focused RPG centered around a party of adventurers who set out to save the kingdom of Vaugarde by defeating the King, who is spreading a curse that freezes all it touches in time. Siffrin, the protagonist, along with Isabeau, Mirabelle, Odile, and Bonnie, must navigate the treacherous depths of the House of Change while dealing with traps and enemies making their way to the throne room to face the King.

The day before entering the House, you spent time with your band of heroes, talking about your hopes and aspirations, and the next day, you set off. However, on your first foray into the House, you carelessly walk into a boulder trap, and die... but time rewinds, and you wake back up on the field you took a nap in at the beginning of... yesterday?!

The player must play through the day and the House again, and again, and again. Over and over, experiencing the same things, finding new ways to die and learning new routes to progress. What starts as a cool gimmick to evade traps and to defeat the King turns into a prison, straining Siffrin's relationship with his friends, and eventually, his sanity. The time looping mechanic allows for learning through constant repetition, revealing information about the world, the relationships between Siffrin and his party, the ability to open up, to become vulnerable, and ultimately, to accept change.

Characters

SIFFRIN

Our time-looping protagonist. Siffrin is the party's resident rogue, finding traps and keys for the party, as well as the fastest of our adventurers. Thus, he is responsible for protecting the party from unseen dangers. Siffrin hails from a now forgotten country, about which he cannot remember anything about, his memories getting fuzzy and ultimately disappearing each time he tries to recall his past. He is friendly, caring deeply for his friends and the connections he holds with them, always quick to crack a joke to cheer them up, but is also forgetful and careless. However, underneath his outward appearance, he is very hard on himself, blaming himself for missed traps and events that may not entirely be his fault, as well as being very secretive, bottling up his emotions in order to protect his role and the perceived norm of the party, which leads to the start of the events of *In Stars and Time*, catching himself in a time loop. He seeks to defeat the King, but also finds a way to break out of the time loops.



ODILE



Odile is a researcher from the far-off country of Ka Bue. New to the lands of Vaugarde, she has joined the party to continue her purported “research” and helps the party with her expertise of Crafting, the magic system of this world. She acts cold to the party, but actually deeply cares about them. She's incredibly perceptive, perhaps due to her age (or her glasses), being among the first to notice something changing with Siffrin's behavior throughout the course of the game, and even figuring out the time loop before the big reveal in Act 6, though she won't tell you about it. Being new to Vaugarde has her, like Siffrin, unfamiliar with the Change faith. In the end, it's revealed that she doesn't really research anything, and only came to Vaugarde to find out about the culture and see if she could find a place to fit in, being half-Vaugardian herself, and not feeling at home in Ka Bue.

MIRABELLE

Mirabelle is a housemaiden of Change and a former resident of the House of Change. She is caring and polite, and worries about the safety of her friends. She wields a special immunity to the King's freezing curse, being blessed by the Head Housemaiden during her escape from the House of Change, the only one to do so. This leads to the people of Vaugarde to believe that she is the chosen of the Change God, which leads to stress as she continues her quest to defeat the King as well as a crisis of faith as she navigates her own belief Change. She is the "main character" of the story, being the only one who can strike down the King, and restore the frozen people of Vaugarde.



in

ISABEAU

Isabeau is a (former) Defender of Jouvente, who serves as the physical strength of the party. He wields immense physical strength, and is loud and boisterous, loves to party and have fun with his friends. He is also quite sensitive to the feelings of his fellow party members, and actively tries to help those who are not feeling well. He is the romantic interest of Siffrin, both holding romantic emotions for each other, despite their personalities not allowing themselves to fully express this interest. He has undergone extensive bodycrafting, changing his body to allow him to be more outwardly confident, and yet still suffers from self-confidence and self-image issues, hiding behind his loud and outgoing personality. While putting on the act of confidence, his original personality still remains, preventing him from fully expressing himself on touchy topics, like his feelings for Siffrin.



BONNIE

Bonne is the latest addition to the party, who joins after having their sister frozen in time by the King. They are a young child with a reckless and brash temperament, who is protected by the rest of the party. Yet she feels entirely unsatisfied with this. This prompted the team to bestow upon them the role of being in charge of snacks, a



role they fall into quite nicely due to their love of cooking. During each of the rest points in the game, Bonnie will offer a variety of snacks to the player, as well as providing various buffs and attacks during fights. They always want to do more to help the team, being scared of being a burden and causing pain to the rest of the party, ever since Siffrin lost an eye protecting them, and eventually learns how to fight under Siffrin's tutelage.

THE KING

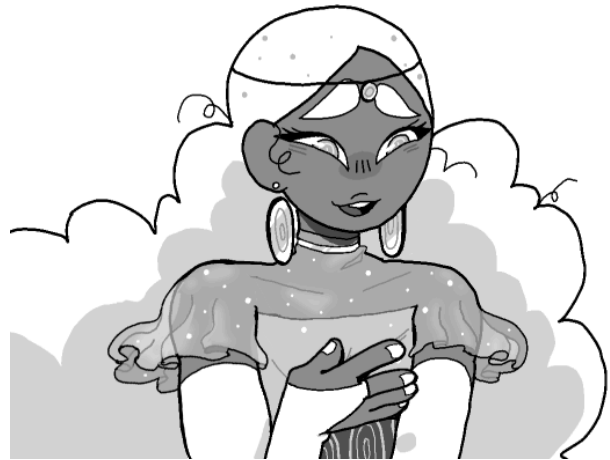


The villain of the story, seeking to freeze Vaugarde in time forever, preserving its perfect people, places, and culture. He hails from the same island country that Siffrin is from, and after being found washed up on a beachhead, he was accepted into Vaugardian society. Experiencing this, and fearing that Vaugarde would suffer the same fate as his home country, he wishes for a way to preserve Vaugarde forever: by freezing it in time, permanently. While he acts calm and collected each time he is faced by Siffrin's party, it is revealed that he will stop at nothing to further his goals, even endlessly killing Bonnie upon realizing Siffrin's associations with his home country and Siffrin's time-looping powers, just to

continue tormenting him.

HEAD HOUSEMAIDEN

The Head Housemaid, Euphrasie, serves as a role model for Mirabelle, and is the one who blessed Mirabelle with the ability to resist the King's Curse, enabling her escape from House of Change. She is very well versed in Crafting, and was able to realize the extent of the power of Wish Craft that The King and the Siffrin are able to use. Her research on The King before his invasion proves crucial to solving the mystery of his identity. She is also the one who first reveals Siffrin's time-loops not stopping upon defeating the King.



LOOP

A mysterious character who appears to help Siffrin along the journey to exit the loops. Loop is the only other character aside from Siffrin to exist across the loops, remembering all of Siffrin's actions,

and advising him on what to try on each loop, giving hints of the next step. Loop disappears after Siffrin exits the loops, but depending on certain actions taken over the course of the adventure, can reappear, attempting to kill Siffrin and revealing that they are also Siffrin—but from a different timeline where they had given up all hope of escape from the time loops and made a wish for help, which sent Loop to our Siffrin’s timeline.

Breakdown

In Stars and Time uses its time-looping mechanic to generate its meaning, utilizing repetition to create meaning through even the smallest moments. In traditional RPGs, there is a clear wall between the player and the character they control: while the player does control the character, many of the events of the gameplay do not affect the character the same way it affects the player. One example of this is death.



Meaning Through Death

In many games, death is simply used as a deterrent to failure, a result of you failing in knowledge or skill. The player experiences the frustration of failure, and the consequent punishments associated with it: spending time walking back to a boss fight, reloading a save, or losing items. This disconnects the action of dying from the narrative of the game: it is an accepted part of gaming culture, and simply a part of playing the game. The character does not

experience death, and that death rarely has an impact on the overall narrative. It is purely a gameplay function, creating a wall between the player and the character.

By utilizing death as a narrative element, *In Stars and Time* transforms death, its consequent frustrations, and the endless time-looping, into further immersion, seating the player character ever deeper into Siffrin's mind, breaking and mending it as the story progresses. The game makes Siffrin embody the player, setting up an emotional arc for Siffrin that is in sync with the emotions the player experiences with the time-looping mechanic of the game. This, rather than the player attempting to embody the character, puts an amazing twist on the classic blank slate self-insert silent RPG hero, and bridges the usual gap in connection between the player and their character.

Upon each death, Siffrin wakes up in the flower field in Dormont, sending the player back to the beginning of the story. This is a cool feature at first: Siffrin, and the player, realizing that there is no real consequence for failing, assume that success is guaranteed.



Each time you fail, whether it be from a death or a dead end that you can't escape from, you get sent back to the beginning of the story. Death becomes a required part of progression. The game turns a mundane reality of gaming—that for there to be a challenge, there must be a punishment to motivate you—into a vehicle for progression.

For example: on the Second Floor, you pass through a classroom, happening upon "Marc's Super Awesome Great Amazing Super Duper Cool Notebook (DO NOT TOUCH)" The player assumes it is just flavor text, as there are no further interactions with it.



However, at the end of the Third Floor, you encounter a locked door requiring the Crying Key to unlock the way to the Fourth Floor, where The King sits in waiting. The door tells you that the Crying Key is hidden in a notebook on the second floor classroom, the very same



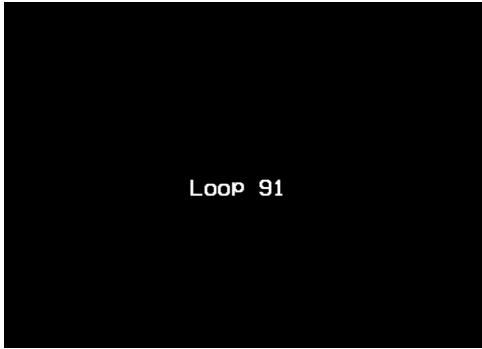
notebook the player interacted with before, and assumed nothing of. You are left with no way of reaching the previous classroom, so you reset to the beginning.

But don't worry, you don't have to start from the beginning of the entire game. You are able to choose from several options where you'd like to reset to, either to the very beginning of the day, or to the beginning of each floor of the House. And so, you go back to the second floor and retrieve the key, allowing you to progress further.



Death is no longer just an inconvenience; a punishment. Death how *ISAT* progresses. What has been a mundane event becomes an event crucial to moving onwards. The connection between Siffrin and the player grows stronger as they share the experience of each and every death and subsequent reset, and importantly, their reactions to it. Each reset, each death, is not only experienced by the player in front of the screen, but by Siffrin the character as well. This adds a huge emotional weight to death, regardless of the death's

(in)significance, especially with one of the ways the game reminds you of how many times you've reset: the game over screen gives you a total death count.



Fatigue and Player Choices

This stronger connection to Siffrin throughout the time loops amplifies the emotions that Siffrin and the player both feel. As Siffrin progresses throughout the game, the number of loops increases ever more. Each loop is a reset for Siffrin, forcing him and the player to replay through the same day, over, and over again.

Death soon becomes a menial task to reset for a puzzle or to find another clue, even with the game's generous ability to pick a point to reset to. This fatigue, built over constant and endless

looping, begins to affect Siffrin. One example of this is that his internal thoughts slowly become more and more unhinged. At the beginning, they show mild acceptance of the loops...



```
(But... You're back. Back to the day before you went to the House.)  
  
(...How?)  
(And why?)  
(And... Can you make sure to not die this time?)  
  
(Back to work, Siffrin. You have a country to save.)
```

then turning to panic...

```
(You're back here you're back here you're back here you're back here you're back here you're back here you're back here you're back here you're back here your journey was over and you're back here)  
(Your journey was over, wasn't it!!!! You won, didn't you!!! You all survived, right!!!! And yet!!! AND YET, YOU'RE--!!!!!!)  
(YOU TRY BREATHING IN BUT YOU CAN'T BREATHE- YOU CAN'T BREATHE--)
```

and then to murderous intent.

```
(If only you knew if only the wish wasn't broken if only you could get to the king deal the final hit end it all and finally you'll be with your family forever and you'll be okay and you can just end it all you just need to get to the king deal the final hit make the wish come true make sure it all loops around you kill the king rip him to pieces for making you remember for making you see for not understanding for killing bonnie for getting in your blinding way every time you just need to kill him kill him kill him kill him kill him kill him kill him kill him kill him kill him kill him kill him kill him kill him kill him kill him kill him you just)
```

The way the thoughts are written out changes as well, going from coherent sentences to stream of consciousness mumbo-jumbo. With the player experiencing each loop alongside Siffrin, these thoughts resonate much more strongly with the player, feeling frustration, fear, and a slow descent into insanity. The frustration is a core part of the game, and unlike other difficult games like *Dark Souls*, the player's frustration is also the character's frustration.

Siffrin also has the ability to act out many of the thoughts we have as a player. The two biggest examples of this are the abilities to *Use the dagger*, and to *Zone Out*.

Using the dagger

To reset back to the beginning, the player must die, or be frozen in time by a Tear. In the House, the player can die from traps and enemies, or look for a Tear to touch to freeze themselves. This can become an annoying task, and after 20 loops by touching a Tear, you are given the option to kill yourself with your dagger to reset without looking for a Tear or enemy. This is an extreme option, as death by dagger is far more gruesome than simply freezing yourself in a Tear, and Loop actively discouraging it. But what does it matter? You will still just loop back to the beginning.



```
(You take your dagger in your hand.)  
(Just a fast and easy way to loop back, haha!)  
(...)  
(Using a dagger on yourself... This is gonna be rough.)  
(You'll go back, sure, but you'll be killing yourself.)  
(Are you 100%, ABSOLUTELY sure you want to go through with this..?)
```

This option has no effect on gameplay at all—it is simply a way to reset more quickly. You do not lose anything from doing it. In fact, its convenience probably makes you want to use it more. But the game is very careful about the options it gives you. Of course, you can use the dagger on yourself if you wish. But you can also ask Loop to take the option away.

```
Loop (ew1): ...Sure. If you want to.  
Loop (happy1): Do you want to? As upset as I am, this IS a useful skill to have, you know.  
Loop (ew1): It'll only get easier and faster, too.  
Loop (ew1): Anything that makes a loop end slightly quicker.
```

```
Siffrin (hide1):
```

```
> "I don't want to be able to do that anymore." (Stop being able to use your dagger on yourself.)
```

```
> "...I'll keep it." (Keep your dagger.)
```

The fact that you are given a chance to lose that ability means that the player has now placed their own value upon a death, outside the ability to reset. Or more accurately, the means to die. Because if death truly meant nothing, then who cares how you die? The player who chooses to *never* kill themselves has now assigned their own value to not using the dagger, despite no tangible benefit to *not* killing yourself with it, enhancing the player's emotional connection to Siffrin. Despite the fatigue of constant looping, the player would rather spend the extra time making sure Siffrin's allies don't have to suffer through watching a suicide, than to save a couple of seconds finding a Tear. The assignment of meaning by the player allows for a deeper connection to Siffrin.

Or you can choose to keep using the dagger. It's faster, after all.

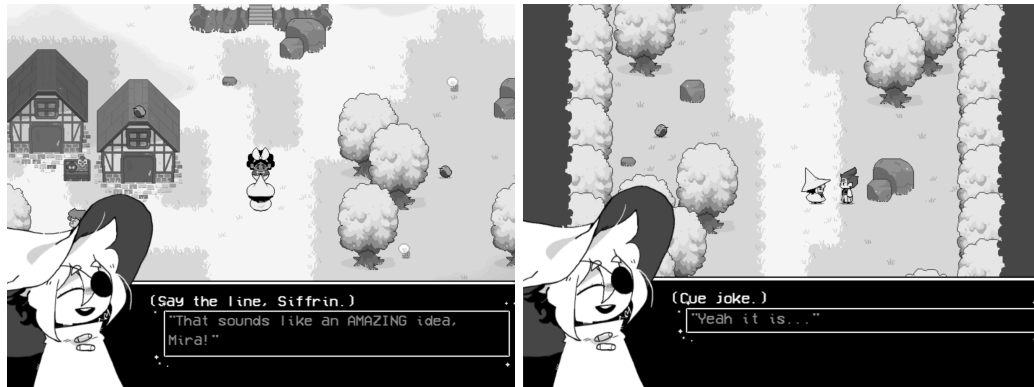
Zoning Out

The player also has the ability to zone out and fast-forward through conversations. Importantly, the game never lets us *skip* dialogue outright, only fast-forward through it. The only skip we're allowed is through the choice of reset point. All dialogue *must* be watched through, whether it be on fast forward or at normal speed. This forces the player to make the active choice of **not listening**.

The game does confirm that using the fast forward button will only let us go through dialogue that the player has already seen before, and we will not miss anything important. However, the fact that you, again, must *choose* to zone out imparts an emotional impact onto the player: that both the player and Siffrin have lost interest in the conversations, replying with the same responses over and over again, getting the same responses. It is much different than skipping the dialogue outright, because the player must sit and wait for the dialogue to finish, despite its fast pace. Forcing the player to fast forward widens the gap in connection between the player and Siffrin between the other members of the



party. Siffrin becomes more and more like the player, and starts seeing their friends as obstacles, dehumanizing them, and simply as dialogue prompts to jump through to continue onwards towards The King. This dehumanization is core to the fatigue the player and Siffrin feel, allowing both of them to slip into apathy and hatred.

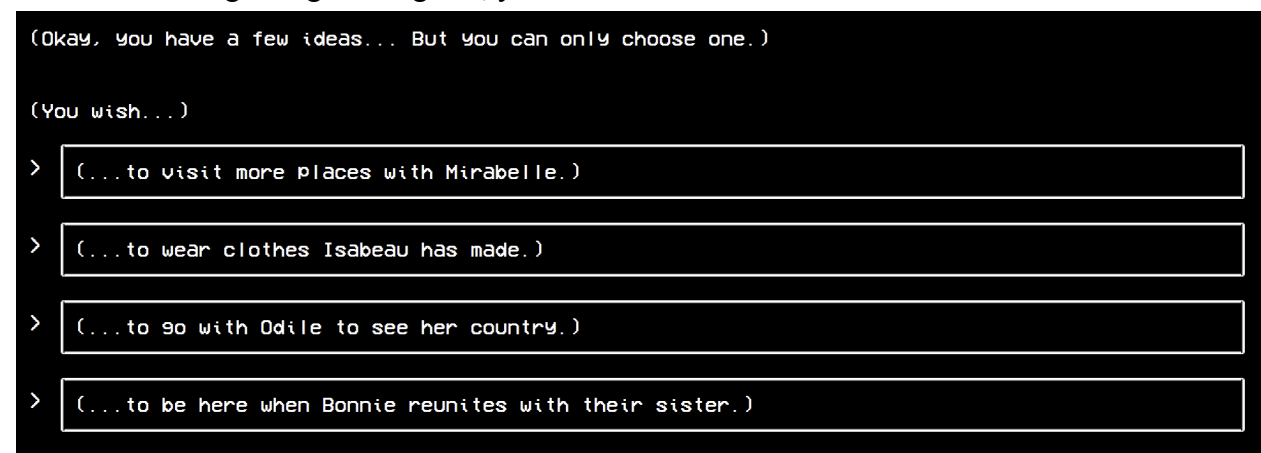


The game also removes the ability to fast forward through specific and *optional* emotional interactions, forcing the player to experience the same emotional toil each time, which only serves to enhance the emotions experienced as well as the disconnect of tuning out and spamming the spacebar to continue through dialogue, eventually leading the player to skip the interaction altogether to save time.

Most notably, this happens with Isabeau each time you loop back and talk to him. As your sole romantic interest, many of his dialogues are not fast-forwardable, which forces the player to experience the failed romances over, and over, until eventually, the player and Siffrin both lose hope and interest in the conversation, and Isabeau, at all, and shut themselves off from further interaction.

Accumulation and Destruction of Meaning

At the beginning of the game, you make a wish.



Regardless of which one you choose, you will always end up with the phrase:

(You want to stay with them!)

The key word here: *stay*. It is referenced constantly throughout the game, alongside its counterpart, *change*. From the very beginning, you are on the side of change: your companions Mirabelle and Isabeau are both adherents to the Change faith, and you are fighting to free everyone from the frozen state that The King has imposed on them, for he is ultimate incarnation of the concept of *staying*: he wishes to freeze everything in Vaugarde.

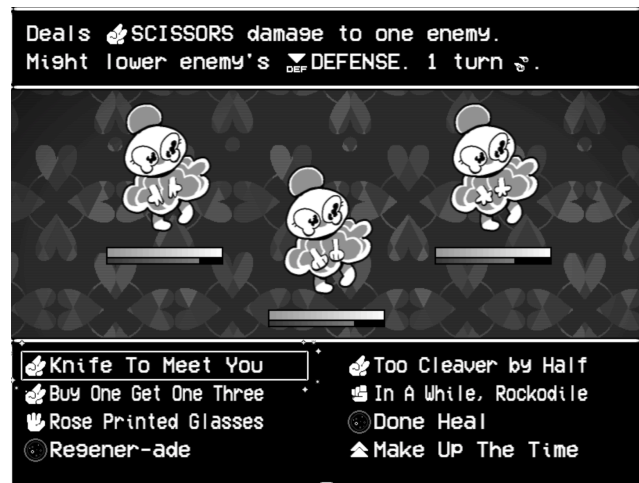
You fight for change, and yet, the very wish you state at the beginning of the game is to stay with your party members. Each time you loop, you hope to change the future, and at the same time, maintain your relationship with your party. This wish, after all, is the very reason Siffrin is stuck in the loops, his wish to stay with his party combining with the Vaugardian people's wish to defeat The King, forming a twisted paradox whereby sending Siffrin through time loops will constantly fulfil both wishes: The King will constantly be defeated, and Siffrin will stay with his party.

This wish gains more and more meaning over time as you learn about the circumstances of the wish, becoming the core of *In Stars and Time*'s controlling idea: that relationships grow stronger when you accept change. It is Siffrin's desire to keep his party together, his fear of them disbanding and leaving their separate ways after defeating The King, his fear of his relationship with his party changing, that keeps him in the time loop.

But meaning is also lost. *In Stars and Time*, being an adventure RPG, naturally has combat. Its combat system is simple: literally Rock-Paper-Scissors. It follows the standard conventions for JRPG combat: turn-based, damage based on level and type of damage, items and cooldowns.

However, Siffrin retains his level each reset, meaning that while the rest of his party start at the same strength as before, Siffrin only ever grows stronger. As you play through more of the game, completing more and more loops, combat eventually becomes trivial. Siffrin

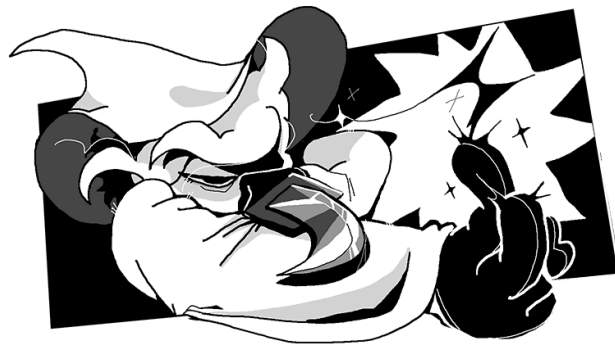
becomes so highly leveled that most fights are a waste of time. Combat becomes meaningless, and the only thing that matters is progress. You loop over and over, fast forward through dialogue, instantly killing enemies, only stopping for clues to further your quest to break out of the loops.



Eventually, in the process of looping, you brutalize an enemy that's been annoying you. You've killed this enemy a million times, each time getting easier and easier, but the fact remains that you still have to do it each loop. You let your anger out, not just killing the enemy, but turning their corpse into a bloody pulp, beating it over and over and over and over again. But it doesn't matter. It will still appear each time.

By slowly chipping away at your care for your allies through the fast-forwarding, the resetting, and the power-scaling, Siffrin becomes the player: relentlessly searching for the goal instead of worrying about his friends. His friends lose their meaning as people. They are merely actors in Siffrin and the player's endless torment.

This destruction of the meaning of combat allows the game to focus the player onto the looping and fatigue, and enhances Siffrin's mental break later on. A core feature of Siffrin's ACT 5 breakdown is the rampage through the House, where Siffrin, so highly overleveled, instantly kills anything and everything in his way, reinforcing the fact that Siffrin has pushed through the loops so many times. In this way, combat actually gains a new meaning: to show how many times Siffrin has gone through the loops, how even the combat has become routine and menial, and how deep in the gutter Siffrin's mental state has deteriorated to, accompanied by a change to darker, scarier character sprites from the previously cheerful tone.



Strongest Element

Second time

(You try your best to pass through the tight space between your [allies/family members], the tables, and the wall.)

(As you pass through, you realize, not for the first time in this situation, that everyone unconsciously makes sure to not touch you any more than necessary.)

(It's not the best feeling, but there must be a reason they're not touching you, so you leave it alone.)

Undoubtedly, the strongest element of *In Stars and Time* is the use of time looping to progress through the story. Each loop, you learn more and more about the world around you, exploring different paths and trying desperately to break out of the cycle. You slowly unravel the

mystery by constantly retracing your steps, taking every tidbit of information you can to progress through the endlessly repeating cycle.

```
Fourth time
(Once again, you can tell that people make sure to give you some space.)
(Steeling yourself, you take a deep breath, and brush against everyone softly.)
(...)
(What a rush!)
```

The constant looping makes you treasure each and every small change: every change in dialogue, even the flavor text on useless decorations, is a valuable break from the monotony of looping, a step in the right direction.

```
Eighth time
(While passing through, you take a deep breath, and--)
(Poke.)

Bonnie (serious1): Poke my cheek again and die.

(Yep, message received.)
(You giggle under your breath.)
```

Siffrin learns through endless repetition that banging their head against the wall alone, trying to orchestrate a grand plan alone, will never work. That keeping secrets and remaining closed to your comrades and family, will never work: for he must *change*.

```
Eleventh time
(Poke poke poke poke.)

Isabeau (hahaha2): Poke!

(!)
(Without meaning to, you smile.)

Isabeau (sif!1): !!!
Odile (awkward1): Kids, please...
```

Unsuccessful Element

While *In Stars and Time*'s writing is strong, expertly dropping hints and showing Siffrin's mental breakdown throughout the progress of the game, some parts feel misplaced. During ACT 5, Siffrin faces a unique enemy after failing to defeat The King: Mal du Pays.



Mal du Pays is a Sadness, a representation of Siffrin's internal fears and strife. While it serves as a useful tool for bringing out Siffrin's fears, its bluntness and appearance only after you are frozen by The King makes it feel out of place. Throughout the entire game, you freeze and instantly get looped back to the start with only the vaguest feeling of what happened when you froze. Breaking that precedent by having an internal struggle, alongside the arrival of your companions with the help of Loop, dampens the impact of Siffrin's choice to brave the House alone.

What made Siffrin's descent into madness so great was that it was shown through Siffrin's actions—his breakdown in front of his friends, hurling abuse at them, rampaging through the House alone, slaughtering all who stand before him. These actions feel impactful due to their contribution to the story and their feeling of natural progression, the next step in Siffrin's mental breakdown. If the others won't cooperate, then he'll do it alone. In contrast, the fight with Mal du Pays feels heavy-handed, and without any context of Mal du Pays beforehand, feels just like a setup to allow for your party's Deus Ex Machina-style saving you immediately after, reducing the impact of your friends' rescue, and consequently your abandonment of them earlier in ACT 5.

A better way to introduce Mal du Pays and to play into Siffrin's deteriorating mental state would be to reuse the ghost mechanic encountered throughout the game or to perhaps combine them with previously encountered enemy Sadnesses. Replacing a ghost or an enemy with Mal du Pays would be a more effective way of introducing this manifestation of Siffrin's negative emotions, and make his confrontation with it after being frozen by The King much less jarring and more meaningful, especially when Siffrin is saved by his companions.



Highlight



his frustration with his comrades endlessly playing the same day, over and over, and finally yells at them, angry that they are not sticking to the script when he tries to speed through the conversations. This is accompanied by a change in their character sprite, gaining a dark shadow above his eyes, making Siffrin look shady and scary.

This is the beginning of Siffrin's nadir: isolating himself from his allies and hoping to finish the quest by himself, because nothing else has worked. By yelling at his companions he breaks their trust and friendship, and ultimately causes them to consider abandoning him. Siffrin has worked himself into a corner, his constant attempts to break the loop destroying his connection to the very party he wishes to stay with, and now must suffer the consequences of his disregard for his party members. You've been faking kindness the entire time, speeding through dialogues, **not listening**.



You still love your companions, but who cares how you treat them now? It'll all be reset.

Their skills have not helped before, you just need to get through their dialogue and try again.

Why are they taking so long?! C'mon, we have to hurry up!

These are all thoughts that race through both the player and Siffrin's head as they play, and almost certainly as they skip through dialogue that has already been said hundreds of times before. In this way, Siffrin is a crystallization of the player's darkest thoughts, a mirror of the

The highlight of this game is when Siffrin finally breaks his facade of kindness for his companions. Throughout your time spent in the time loops you learn to complete special quests for each of your party members to unlock special skills from them each loop. These skills make your time in the House much easier. However, completing these quests takes a long time, even when fast forwarding by zoning out. And fast forwarding also has its own downside as you get a weaker version of the ability.

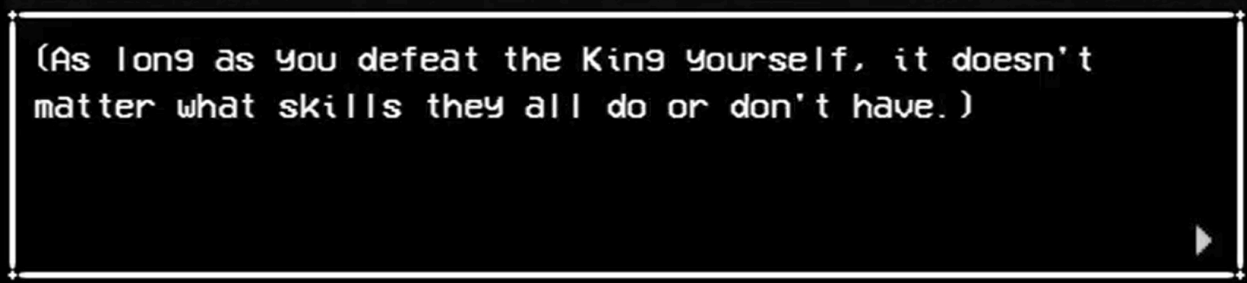
After looping through enough times, Siffrin shows

player's inner thoughts of finding the path out from the time loops. Your companions, your friends, *your family*, become mere obstacles in your path to salvation. They don't matter. All you need to do, all *they* need to do, is to follow the script.

WHY WON'T THEY DO IT?!

...

If they won't listen, then you'll kill The King yourself. That's right.



(As long as you defeat the King yourself, it doesn't matter what skills they all do or don't have.)

Critical Reception

RPGamer - Sam Wachter - 3.5/5

Sam Wachter loved the story and worldbuilding of the game, highlighting “...insertdisc5’s [Adrienne Bazir’s] willingness to confront uncomfortable topics,” and praising the game’s emotional arc and twists, calling it an “emotional rollercoaster.” Wachter says that each character is unique and interesting, each having their own personal struggles that give them the depth they need for game’s story to pull off twists that would have otherwise “...fallen flat with a less nuanced team,” Wachter also says that pacing of the narrative, the speed at which information is given to the player, was great as well, stating that “... the information is presented so the player is given just enough each time to keep the intrigue going.”

However, his review was mainly hampered by the length and repetition of the game, which is a common theme shared across the rest of reviews.

IGN - Rebekah Valentine - No Rating

Valentine absolutely loved the writing of *In Stars and Time*, being enraptured by the mystery at the center of the story, but also loving the sheer depth of the narrative, being surprised by the amount of detail in each loop. She also commented on how openly queer the characters are: “They are gay, and bi, and trans, and varying flavors of asexual, and they talk about these topics with one another with the curiosity and care you would want to see from a group of close, loving, supportive friends.” She then interviews Adrienne Bazir, the creator of the game, and notes that the scale of *In Stars and Time* is a culmination of years and years of dreaming, and that the themes of isolation and mental deterioration were a direct result of the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Overall, Valentine loved the game, and despite not giving it a rating, it’s clear from the article that Valentine loved the game, saying “...I don’t think I’ve been *totally obsessed* with any of them in the way I’ve been obsessed with *In Stars and Time*.”

Checkpoint Gaming - Charlie Kelly - 8/10

Charlie Kelly praises *In Stars and Time*’s writing, comparing it to *Earthbound*, *Undertale*, and *Omori*. Kelly highlights the humor and characterization of the cast, speaking of how funny the dialogue with the NPCs can be, as well as the diversity and care the narrative takes to portray each of the party members. She loved that the cast had non-binary characters and that the story didn’t have any issues with it, saying that “It’s not ever really brought up in dialogue. Their pronouns are just used correctly and I love that touch...”

Kelly also says that the game balances this humor well with deeper, tougher topics of mental health and depression, saying “...it tackles these issues with the delicate care they deserve, depicting accurate moments of depression and self-doubt with dialogue so writing so punchy that it feels *very* similar to some of my own past experiences.” While she does say that this game’s narrative is definitely part of a larger trend of “Earthbound-inspired indie RPGs” about mental health, it fulfills its role exceptionally well, marking it as “...a frontrunner for that odd category we have today.”

Kelly’s main complaints of the game were purely on its length, but she also states that the writing and storytelling of the game “...largely transcends...” the pain points of the game.

Lessons

Let characters embody the player

Siffrin does exactly what the player is doing: playing the game, becoming the actor, saying the lines. Siffrin embodies the fears and frustrations of the player, dealing with the endless repetition and becoming numb to the world because of it. Siffrin’s arc is a crystallization of the player’s thoughts, the good and the bad thoughts: the want to comfort their friends and also the anger at them for not following the script that you’ve memorized so much. The player vividly feels Siffrin’s pain because we are experiencing it alongside him. Each of Siffrin’s actions are not just expected of Siffrin as a character, but also from the player themselves, an extension of the player’s own desire. Each spiral further into madness is an expansion of a thought the player has, from the initial casual attempts at beating the King, to the realization that defeating the King alone isn’t enough to break the loops, to the total breakdown of the relationships between the characters as they say the same things over and over again.

In Stars and Time is structured so that the player’s thoughts are the logical next step—Siffrin and the player’s emotions are in sync with no dissonance, that Siffrin’s actions are not just believable, but the natural next step, enhancing player immersion and engagement.

Impart meaning into the little things...

At the crossroads of narrative and level design, *In Stars and Time*’s repetition forces the player to look for small details and to be engaged with even the most mundane of flavor text. Each loop, some small part of a description of a plant may change because you noticed something about it in a previous loop. An NPC’s dialogue changes in response to your apathy. Siffrin slowly acclimates to touch. These small details may not affect gameplay or the overall narrative at all, but each small interaction serves to immerse the player deeper into the world, providing more characterization to the NPCs, and increasing the player’s connection to the world

and your companions. These extra connections, especially gained through the course of the loops, make Siffrin's break that much more intense—the stronger a bond is, the more extreme its breakage will be. Any narrative game developer should make sure that their game space not only meshes with, but *enhances* the narrative they want to tell.

... and your actions as well.

In most game mechanics, there is a layer of abstraction between the player and the game. When the player chooses to “Attack”, they are not attacking in real life, they are issuing a command for their character to attack. There is a disconnect here, and while the result on the screen may be what the player intends (an attack happens), the player in real life has not done the action of attacking. There is a lost impact from the translation of the intent of the attack to the action of the attack: the interface of the machine. After all, pressing a button to attack has much less of an impact than swinging the sword.

This is in contrast to *ISAT*'s zoning out, where the player physically does the action: ignoring the NPC's dialogue. By making sure the actions are the same actions done by the player outside the screen, the barrier to embodiment is removed. Because this interaction is directly something the player can do in real life, that action gains impact and meaning: the player tunes out alongside Siffrin, and so slowly degrades the care for the NPC.

This is something that the inspirations for *In Stars and Time* do as well: in *Undertale*, the player always has the option to *Spare* the enemy in combat. Instead of killing the enemy, you choose to not act, to let them go. This allows the player to embody the concept of mercy, of compassion, which has a much higher emotional impact than simply killing each enemy, reinforcing the controlling idea of that game: that understanding triumphs when you show compassion. *ISAT*'s zoning out does the same thing—by allowing the player to fast forward through dialogue but never to skip it outright, *ISAT* reinforces its own controlling idea through its negation, that relationships grow weaker only when you don't accept change. By fast forwarding through dialogue, you are explicitly not affecting change, allowing the dialogue to progress as usual, as scripted. It is only in moments when you are stopped, forced to focus, that change happens, and your relationships grow stronger.

By reducing the abstraction, embodiment increase, and therefore increase the impact of your actions on the player—something all narrative and gameplay designers can look to include in their games, whether it be through changing the choices the player gets, or even changing the medium the players interact with: VR, for example, uses motion controls instead of a traditional keyboard/mouse, which can be used to make the player more directly do their actions.

Summation

Through its unique blend of narrative, game mechanics, and worldbuilding, *In Stars and Time* presents an incredibly immersive experience, telling a heart-wrenching story about the consequences of bottling your emotions and the hypocrisy of wanting things to change while remaining the same. By forcing you to repeat your actions over and over, *ISAT* forces you to slow down and appreciate each piece of information, manipulating you to vividly experience the fatigue of time-looping along Siffrin, exploring the mental strain of being an actor in an endless play, and how the refusal to accept change prevents progress forwards. *In Stars and Time* pulls you along for the ride as both you and Siffrin find a way to break out of the time loops, get to know yourself and your companions better, and ultimately, to embrace change.

Credits

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