

Game Narrative Review

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Your Name (one name, please): Katherine Jordan

Your School: Northeastern University

Your Email Address: katherine.a.jordan23@gmail.com

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Game Title: Signs of the Sojourner

Platform: PC, Nintendo Switch, PlayStation, and Xbox

Genre: Narrative deckbuilding RPG.

Release Date: May 14, 2020

Developer: Echodog Games

Publishers: Echodog Games, Digerati

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Dyala Kattan-Wright

Overview

“That fight could have only ended how it did. You and Elias talked past each other. Sometimes, Mom said, it’s fine to not get along. But that time, she stepped in to mediate.”

Signs of the Sojourner is a short, narrative-focused deckbuilding RPG, where to communicate with others you play a card matching game, as a way to build understanding. The quotation above is taken from the game’s tutorial which introduces the player to the communication system and to Rhea, who is the player’s character and silent protagonist of *Signs of the Sojourner*. The gameplay focuses on communication: how you interact with others, what you learn from them, and what you choose to forget. The deck of cards you build over time from these interactions symbolize fragments of ideas and exchanges. These unique conversations with others creates an ever-evolving, branching narrative with a creative and unique way to communicate with NPCs.

Signs of the Sojourner's narrative touches on grief, consequences, and the importance of our community when overcoming hardship. As the game progresses, the player comes to learn of Mom's (Rhea's mother) passing, and we discover that Rhea is joining the Caravan, like Mom did, in order to learn more about her and stop Bartow, Rhea and Elias' hometown, from being dropped off the route. As the player's choices significantly impact the narrative of the game, *Signs of the Sojourner* additionally touches on consequences of our actions, how time spent elsewhere is missed somewhere else. Finally, the Cataclysm, a midgame natural disaster that wreaks havoc throughout the world, becomes a narrative catalyst for community strength. Even when the world is falling apart as they know it, community members in Bartow, and other regions are shown supporting each other through hardship and moving through the additional challenges. The narrative journey begins on the road with the Caravan, and with Elias and the others waiting at home.

Characters

There are many impactful characters in *Signs of the Sojourner* that address themes of grief, consequences, and community support. All characters have narrative growth throughout your interactions and many have additional quests and arcs to follow if your trip permits the time. That being said, the story closely follows these characters:

- **Rhea** – The playable character and protagonist. Having recently experienced the passing of her Mom and subsequent acquisition of her responsibilities, she spends the majority of her time on the road meeting strangers and old friends to gather knowledge and items to sell for her mother's old store. As the Caravan tends to bring in most of Bartow's traffic, Rhea is pressured to succeed in her role or risk having Bartow fend for itself. Other than these narrative beats, she acts as a blank slate, allowing the player to make their own choices based on their interests. Depending on the choices the player makes throughout the game, there are a multitude of different endings that may take place, shedding light on these themes.
- **Elias** – A childhood friend of Rhea, who takes care of the store while Rhea is away. He cares deeply for Rhea, the success of the store, and Bartow. Although he is skeptical of the Caravan's reliability and resources to make Bartow succeed, he still supports the choice Rhea makes. Elias is an active community member, supporting the local roadhouse show by offering to play music, even with no experience, and offering assistance to others with rebuilding after the Cataclysm. In order to advance the connection between Elias and Rhea, the player must keep enough of the compatible

cards, otherwise Elias and Rhea drift apart.

“We’re gonna pull in so many visitors we won’t even need the caravan... maybe.”

- **Nadine** – The leader of the Caravan, a mentor figure, and someone who knew a bit of Mom’s past. She is authoritative, but cares deeply about the safety of the Caravaneers. Although she initially explains that she plans to drop Bartow from the route, through interactions with her you learn that the Rilkers, a family with strong control over trade, are pressuring her to do so. In the early game, Nadine guides Rhea across the different stops of the Caravan until Rhea must eventually choose if she will continue with the Caravan or break away.

“Without the store in good shape, it doesn’t make sense for the Caravan to stop here. Awful waste of resources.”

- **Samuel** – The Bartow Roadhouse owner. He is a community leader in Bartow, and acts as a supportive pillar Rhea can rely on during her grief. After Rhea’s first trip with the Caravan, he decides to put on a Roadhouse show in order to help Bartow survive. Although his character is affected significantly after the Cataclysm event, he remains an active community leader, helping others get through the disaster.





“It’s good to mourn. But let it go on too long... Then it becomes a mope. That’s not good. Not what yer mom would’ve wanted!”



- **Mom** – Rhea’s Mother. Her name is never explicitly stated and she only appears during the tutorial section of the game. She has a complicated and hidden past that Rhea aims to uncover throughout the game by talking to characters and positive interactions. Her legacy appears almost as a guide, influencing Rhea’s actions through quests and conversation. She is the catalyst for Rhea’s journey through grief and her passing is what leads Rhea to assume these responsibilities and ultimately become who she is.



Breakdown

Narrative Mechanics – Building Meaning in RPG Dialogue



The core mechanic of *Signs of the Sojourner* revolves around the way Rhea communicates with others. All players interact with Rhea by playing cards in turn, each with a symbol that represents a style of communication. If the conversation is successfully passed—that is, no illegal mismatches of symbols were made—then the conversation is considered concordant. Otherwise, the conversation is discordant. These symbols, as shown below, become the building blocks for player role play and creativity.

	Empathetic and observant
	Logical and diplomatic
	Creative and industrious
	Direct and forceful

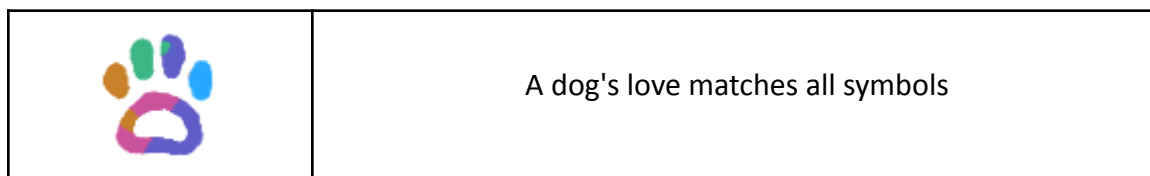
Each character has two symbols, for example, circle  triangle , and most usually keep to these symbols throughout the game. Characters within a given location usually communicate similarly, with their communication symbols matching that of the area. Although there are some exceptions, characters that travel may end up adopting the symbols of the region they travelled to, along with their original symbols. With this system, *Signs of the Sojourner* dissects an often overlooked part of role play games: having meaningful dialogue options with others and allowing player creativity to seep into these interactions.

For example, when Rhea is first approached by Gull in Old Marae, it's easy to feel intimidated by her presence as she interrogates the player. She plays many square  and diamond  cards in quick succession, potentially causing a discordant conversation if the player is inadequately prepared. Players have opportunities to role play during said conversations, allowing them to exercise strategy with decision making, and feel their language have an impact on the NPCs. Conversation is much less immersion-breaking when, similar to reality, you work cooperatively with the other person to reach meaning or even stumble upon misunderstanding.

Furthermore, each time Rhea completes an interaction with a character, successfully or not, she must choose one card to remember and once card to forget. As Rhea's deck and

communication style continues to evolve throughout the game, players begin to align with a certain style, of which is reinforced through subsequent interactions. For example, if a player decides to build into a   , they will have more interactions with others of the same type, and these characters may treat Rhea as such, in this case, give more artistic or demanding comments, reinforcing that Rhea is now a creative and direct character, rather than one that is empathetic and logical.

Along with the core symbols, there are special ones that appear later in the game. When Rhea returns after her second trip, she meets a dog that she names Thunder, thunder has a unique communication symbol:



Any interactions Rhea has with Thunder will match with any symbol the player places, including fatigue cards. These cards have no symbols, meaning it cannot match with anything and are progressively gained the more Rhea travels across the roads. After every interaction with Thunder, Rhea will also lose a fatigue card. This “conversation” between Thunder and Rhea narratively represents spending time with each other and how Thunder’s unconditional love to Rhea strengthens her resolve, for challenges on the road, all without speaking a word to one another.

Ultimately, the symbolic representation of communication styles in *Signs of the Sojourner* allow narrative depth, further opportunities for role play, and complexity to what is normally a standard way of NPC dialogue and communication.

Representations of Grief – Through a Silent Protagonist

Throughout *Signs of the Sojourner*, Rhea’s character tackles the recent passing of her mom and how she is moving through the grief. Although Rhea is a silent protagonist and does not have any direct dialogue with other characters, the narrative demonstrates this through the gameplay and at the end of certain conversations. The game employs the use of a second person limited literary perspective to demonstrate how Rhea feels or what was discussed after concordant or discordant conversations. Additionally, as the gameplay is meant to represent the actual conversation, the dialogue delivered to the player afterwards can be interpreted as the key topics of said interaction. Frequently, these topics revolve around what kind of person Rhea’s mom was and that others feel impacted by her passing as well.

“Yep... Losing yer mom left a giant-sized hole in this town, that’s fer sure. Everyone here’s been so damn down—cluding myself.”

This line is presented by Samuel before he asks for help during the roadhouse show. The intentional framing of this line of dialogue, rather than the conversation that Rhea is making, puts emphasis on what is important to her and is on her mind at this moment.

“You were never close with Isabella but she always seemed kind to Mom. This could be a chance to become better friends—and sample some tasty candy.”





The above text is an example of a post concordant conversation dialogue box with Isabella. Again, it specifically highlights Rhea’s thoughts on her Mom’s passing without the use of player dialogue and also describes how she plans to move forward.

Another way Rhea’s grief is represented is through recollections of her mom’s trips and memories on the road. Occasionally, when driving to another location, an event where Rhea pulls over and looks through her mom’s notes will pop up. If players engage with this event, they will lose a fatigue card, a card which is added to the deck with no symbols, meaning it cannot match with anything and is progressively gained the more Rhea travels across the roads. During these scenes, the soundtrack may become quiet to represent the grief and feelings Rhea is working through. These narrative choices help emphasize Rhea's feelings without the need to use character dialogue.

These specific literary choices leave room for player expression while Rhea tackles her grief. Players may relate to Rhea more while she is moving through this time of her life, as her actual dialogue is abstracted from the game allowing players to place how they would feel on her character. This gives opportunities for players to role play in whatever way makes the most sense to them.

Choices that Matter – and their Consequences and Outcomes

At its core, *Signs of the Sojourner* is a game based on choice. What location should be explored? Which NPC should I talk with? These are frequent questions the player may ask themselves while Rhea is on a trip. The truth is, much like reality, Rhea is forced to make serious decisions about where her time matters most. Whether that be with strangers—far away from Bartow, or with Elias and her mom’s old friends—close to home. Having Rhea tackle this topic throughout the game makes for an impactful narrative and leaves the player with something to think about. Below is a table of some of the most important choices the player will need to make throughout the game, and their effects their actions will have on Rhea and the ending they receive:

Choice	Outcomes
<p>Over the course of several trips, the player has a choice between sticking exclusively with the Caravan or having Rhea go out of her way to collect specific items for NPCs in Bartow or otherwise.</p>	<p>If the player decides to stay with the caravan: Rhea will miss opportunities to deepen relationships with NPCs, especially Elias, who rely on Rhea’s access to resources</p> <p>If the player drifts from the caravan: Rhea’s relationship will be strained with Nadine, and Bartow risks being dropped off the caravan route. Additionally, Rhea may gain fatigue cards quicker, as the caravan generally takes an efficient route around the map.</p>
<p>Each conversation Rhea must make a choice of a card to remember and a card to forget, leaving her with an ever-evolving communication style. Unlike traditional deckbuilder games, Rhea’s deck always has the same size, 10 cards.</p>	<p>If the player keeps a   compatible deck: Rhea will be able to communicate with Elias and have opportunities to deepen their relationship. Additionally, Rhea may learn more about her mother through her old friends and strengthen connections with those NPCs. In contrast, the player may feel limited to only a couple of the starting areas and will miss opportunities to meaningfully connect with characters from further regions.</p> <p>If the player has a   heavy deck: Rhea will have opportunities to explore further areas of the map and engage in the arcs and storylines of harder to reach NPCs, such as the Rilkers storyline. Depending on how the deck is built Rhea also may be able to bring back much more resources for the shop and items that characters request from her. The major consequence to this choice is that Rhea will be unable to communicate reliably with Elias and her mom’s old friends and will watch their current relationships begin to drift with those she cared about.</p>


Both of these choices and consequences highlight the reality of the situation: one does not have unlimited time, and in order to feel fulfilled, a choice must be made on which outcomes




the player feels can be endured. This may feel unsatisfying at times, given that traditional dialogue trees in RPGs usually guarantee success as long as the player remains polite, but these choices, and their similarities to reality, are also the main driving factor for different endings Rhea may receive.


The game has several endings, depending on which characters you decide to talk to and build your deck into over the course of the game. Through making key choices throughout the game, characters will also begin to reveal their story arcs and development after concordant conversations. The outcomes, both positive and negative, allow the player to experience the narrative through the results of these different choices .


Community Support when Overcoming Hardship

Midway through the game, a devastating natural disaster strikes the world of *Signs of the Sojourner*. The Cataclysm, which happens after Rhea's third trip, is an earthquake that destroys towns, floods villages and indirectly causes the death of an NPC. In response to these events, a new symbol is added to the game, which represents the collective trauma and hardship NPCs feel in response to the disaster.


	Distressed and grieving
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Characters who were affected by the Cataclysm, add this symbol to their deck in addition to their other symbols. For example, Lars, a character who usually has   will receive spiral  after his home in Tosende Canals flooded.

This symbol may seem like it opens opportunities for the player to interact with characters that have noncompatible decks, narratively communicating with their shared trauma of the event. If a player decides to adopt  cards into their deck, they may have more success in certain conversations, as they empathize with the NPCs feelings and struggle. Though, similar to reality, this symbol is unreliable as many who were seriously affected by the Cataclysm may accidentally mismatch cards and derail conversations, apologizing that they aren't themselves or mentioning something that happened to them. This specific manipulation of the game's core mechanic and system, narratively represents how the trauma of serious events can make it difficult for others to communicate how they feel and participate in their usual activities.

The choice to have Rhea be able to use  is a deliberate one. Although many people she cares about suffer from the disaster, her shop remained relatively unharmed and did not lose any of her other possessions. Narratively, if the player incorporates these symbols into their deck, they

choose to empathize with those who were affected by the Cataclysm, and bring support to those who need it.

The choice to use  as a representation of collective trauma sparks some thoughtful narrative choices and emphasizes the developer's view of the complexity of surviving a disaster like this and also how characters can support one another through these moments.

All of these aspects of *Signs of the Sojourner* cumulate into a narratively complex game that tackles serious topics, such as grief and fulfillment, in a nuanced and original way. Not only does the core gameplay mechanic exhibit a strong controlled system, but the added narrative and artistic aspects are what make this game thoughtful and deliberate.







Strongest Element


The strongest element of *Signs of the Sojourner* is the ludo-narrative harmony present with the card exchange mechanic. The game masterfully breaks away from repetitive systems in traditional RPGs and deals with player immersion in an inventive way. Instead of focusing on high quality graphics that mimic realism, the game instead focuses on the realism of conversation, how connection is a nonlinear activity. There are no right words to say to immediately get what you want, instead these interactions are more like a dance, working cooperatively to achieve meaning.

Every element in these card exchanges has a purpose in the narrative, rather than just being present for the sake of gameplay. When two cards with the same symbols are put down in succession, they acquire an accord, which acts as protection against one mismatch. Narratively this represents the building of understanding, and a reinforcement against a misunderstanding that would regularly cause a discordant interaction. Another example of this lies in the abilities cards may gain, like elaborate which duplicates right side symbols of the previously placed card. These abilities not only add utility and further possibility in achieving a concordant conversation, but also highlight how characters with less compatible decks can still share meaning, just with more difficulty and strategy needed. The execution of these elements are what make *Signs of the Sojourner* so unique and meaningful. A wonderful balance of gameplay and story.

Unsuccessful Element

Although *Signs of the Sojourner*, mimics the reality of relationships and grief in a unique and original way, it falls short in its full implementation of this concept, particularly with the representation of the NPCs communication styles and identities. Rhea's identity is constantly

shifting over time, much like people's identities, but regardless of the amount of interaction Rhea has with other characters, their decks never change. A character with   will always have  , no matter how many interactions with   or a similar deck. This execution leaves the 10 card deck feeling artificially restrictive, as in reality, a person can pick up many communication styles and stick with a couple that work best with them. At first glance, this drawback may be what is holding the game back from being a cozier RPG game. On a deeper look, the deck limit is intentional and necessary, as it represents the choices one must make, with the limited time they have. Having NPC decks change with Caravaneer and Player interaction would immerse the non-player characters deeper into the world, and give them a more realistic feel, as like people, their identities and speech patterns should also shift with exposure to new ideas.

This added change would also give a deeper role-play feel, as direct outcomes from the player's previous interactions would be visible quickly and have the player consider how their words stuck with the NPC. This approach would also be interesting to see with  as it makes sense for characters who care about Rhea to also adopt this card, out of empathy for what she is going through. These gameplay changes could help solidify the ludo-narrative harmony that is quite strong in *Signs of the Sojourner* already, and also allow players to make impactful decisions without needing to make extremely careful card decisions at the end of every conversation.

Highlight

The most impactful moments in *Signs of the Sojourner* occur when Rhea returns home after a trip to stock the store and connect with her friends and family. Depending on how the player built their deck, this can either help Elias and Rhea strengthen their bond through shared time, or could take a more solemn path. If the player knows that they cannot communicate effectively with Elias, do they still try? Or do they choose not to speak with Elias, out of avoidance of the conversation that will inevitably unfold. As the relationship between Elias and Rhea begins to drift, Rhea will be shown unwinding by herself, in the places where she and Elias used to spend time together.

On the other hand, if the player keeps Rhea's original deck, the shop may begin to suffer, as it becomes increasingly more difficult to obtain resources for it, with the one communication style. The player is left with a curiosity of what could have been, if they decided to explore more, and change their deck more significantly.

The choice between family or success is a difficult one to make, and seeing how the player's decision plays out in the narrative is impactful and emotionally charged, leaving the player completely immersed in the storytelling.

Critical Reception

TheSixthAxis – Jonny Foster, 6/10

Foster praises the artstyle, soundtrack and gameplay system, noting that the use of card abilities along with the core mechanic creates a clever and wonderful abstraction of everyday communication. The main criticism presented is that the card balancing needs to be adjusted as pertinent information to Rhea's development as a character can easily be missed, creating stressful and unsatisfying gameplay. He adds that "this quickly took Signs of the Sojourner from a soothing tranquil adventure to a brooding slog where I had to overanalyse my decisions... in order to advance." Overall, he expresses ludo-narrative dissonance with the way the balancing and the general aesthetic of the game, but feels that an adjustment to the difficulty would make him feel more engaged.

RPG Site – Dani Maddox, 90/100

Maddox finds the core mechanic of the game to be refreshing compared to common dialogue structures present in RPG games. Signs of the Sojourner gives players opportunities to imagine their own conversations and dialogue that spark concordant or discordant conversations. The main criticism presented is that building a deck that pleases everyone is not possible and this may be a problem if this is the playstyle you plan for your character. Although, if you accept this reality and adjust, it's still possible to have a fulfilling time. Overall, Maddox praises the world building, the seeming simplicity of the game, and the flexibility in creating and reshaping your character.

The Guardian – Jay Castello, 80/100

Castello highlights the vivid descriptions present in the locations throughout Signs of the Sojourner. They praise the narrative, how the people are compassionate and aim to support others through hardship. They touch on the gameplay and the feeling of not fitting in when in a new location or when meeting new people. Overall, Castello finds signs of the Sojourner's narrative, artstyle, and gameplay choices create a way for players to step into a new world.

Lessons

Abstract systems can say more while using less

The choice to detach the player from dialogue and instead have it be a core mechanic is what makes *Signs of the Sojourner's* narrative so unique and captivating. The core mechanic portrays themes of identity, choice and grief already present in the narrative and artistic style. Having a simpler gameplay system allows the player to fully role play Rhea and have the player's personality show up in game.

Complex feeling can be tackled without reliance on dialogue

Throughout the game Rhea moves through her grief without saying a single word. Even so, the execution remains impactful and allows players to connect with her character on a deep level, giving players opportunities to process the situation in their own ways. This shows skillful control of narrative storytelling and an impactful divergence from common ways these topics are handled.

Outcomes from choices are not good or bad

Signs of the Sojourner highlights an important aspect of reality through its narrative implementation. The choices you make are more complex than just a negative or a positive outcome. This design choice present within the game, makes the narrative have great depth, and teaches players impactful lessons about life through a seemingly simple concept.

Summation

Overall, the narrative elements and the core gameplay mechanic of *Signs of the Sojourner* tackles the navigation of grief, the impact of our choices, and the communities role in overcoming trauma and hardship. Through dialogue presented or obscured, the player is invited to engage with the lessons and themes of the game in a way that is unique and refreshing for role playing games. Along with these themes, non-player characters have growth through the course of the story and draw the player into the vivid and colorful world.

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