

# Game Narrative Review

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**Game Title:** Flower

**Platform:** PS3, PS4, PS Vita, PC, iOS

**Genre:** Immersive, Relaxing, Casual, Atmospheric, Adventure

**Release Date:** February 12, 2009

**Developer:** thatgamecompany

**Publisher:** Sony Computer Entertainment, Annapurna Interactive

**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** Jenova Chen

## Overview

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"To see a **World in a Grain of Sand**

And a **Heaven in a Wild Flower,**

Hold **Infinity in the Palm** of your Hand

And **Eternity in an Hour.**"

— William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*

A single petal breaks free from its potted prison. This is **Blake's first line**, to see a World in a Grain of Sand, made playable. What happens when you stop looking at a flower and start looking into it? When you realize each petal carries the entire story of restoration, each touch contains the whole arc of healing?

*Flower* is the daydream of a potted plant. You are wind, carrying petals across grey fields that bloom green at your touch. Six levels in sixty minutes, with no dialogue, no enemies, no failure states, there is only motion turning death into life. The game begins in a serene grass

field, it moves through an industrial hellhole, and then ends up in an urban transcendence. All of that with one single mechanic: gather the petals to restore the world.

It puts forward the question, can a force without form restore what human ego has wounded? How do you write about the narrative of a game this spare and this abstract? This paper will accept *Flower's* own challenge: say more with less. Let each section be its own petal, carrying the whole within the fragment.

## Characters

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In *Flower*, the traditional concept of character is subverted. There are no heroes with names, no villains with monologues. The narrative actors are entirely elemental and environmental, forcing a re-evaluation of what—or who—can drive a story.

*A Swirl of Petals traversing = Wind + Petals + Landscape for traversal*

**Wind:** You have no physical appearance. There is no avatar standing between your intention and your action. You exist via what you touch and what you change. This is where the game makes a radical move: removing the self to deepen connection.

**Petals:** The collective, made visible. Each flower touched adds another voice to the chorus, another petal to the flow. Petals are your unseen will; they represent that there is change occurring.

**Landscape:** Both the wound and the healer. In its grey ruin, it resists you. In its vibrant bloom, it responds to you. The story is not about defeating an enemy, but witnessing how the world heals itself as you are present.

## Breakdown: How Kinesthetic Montage Creates Narrative

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*Face → Food = Hunger (intellectual)*

Filmmaker Eisenstein taught cinema that two images in sequence create meaning being understood in the mind.

*Bloom + Note + Surge = Restoration (somatic)*

*Flower* made grey turn green. *Flower* speaks through fusion. *Flower* translates this to the body. Color, sound, and motion don't collide in sequence but three sensations simultaneously fuse into meanings felt, rather than understood. This is *Flower's* kinesthetic montage: narrative written in sensation.

The difference is the collapse. Eisenstein's elements remain distinct, you see face, then food, then think hunger. *Flower's* elements fuse, you cannot separate the color from the sound from the acceleration. They speak as one sensation. This is why "kinesthetic." From the Greek, it means the body's awareness of its own motion. The montage doesn't happen on screen, it presents in the player's awareness the instant it happens. The moment you drift towards a wilted flower and touch:

**First flower:**

- Visual: Bloom, petal joins
- Auditory: One clear note
- Physical: Slight momentum increase

Your brain processes three separate stimuli.

**Third flower:**

- Visual: Ribbon of petals trailing
- Auditory: Three notes harmonizing into a chord
- Physical: Noticeable acceleration

Your brain begins linking them.

**Tenth flower:**

- Visual: Wave of color spreading outward, grass greening in expanding circles
- Auditory: Rising arpeggio
- Physical: Controller rumbling continuously

Your brain stops separating them. The montage collapses into one sensation: "I am making the world alive." This is patient conditioning. The game teaches your body a new language, one word at a time, until you can process the entire narrative even without conscious thought. By the time you reach the windmill and hundreds of petals spiral upward to a full swell, you neither analyze the cause-and-effect, nor the narrative. You simply feel triumph, and understand. Compare this to another game, *Portal's* narrative teaches you to think with portals through explicit dialogue from GLaDOS and isolated, carefully designed challenges. Yet *Flower's* narrative teaches you to feel restoration through repeated sensory fusion. The tutorial IS the narrative. The conditioning IS the arc.

Then comes the industrial sequence that inverts everything you've learnt.

Previous kinesthetic montage:

***Touch flower* → *Bloom* + *Note* + *Surge* = *Restoration***

Industrial kinesthetic montage:

***Touch pylon* → *Shock flash* + *Harsh buzz* + *Violent vibration* = *Danger***

Same structure. Opposite meaning. The genius is in the deception. The pylons even look like flowers from a distance. Your body conditioned by the prior gameplay, tilts innately towards them expecting the familiar bloom-note-surge sensation. Muscle memory activates before conscious thought. Instead, you get pain-noise-jolt. This is how *Flower* depicts trauma without explicit violence. This is trauma encoded as kinesthetic montage. The game spent four levels teaching player's perception "touching = restoration." Now it weaponizes that learning.

The schema that created safety now creates fear. The fusion that meant "healing" now means "rejection." Philosopher Glenn Albrecht calls this solastalgia, a type of distress caused by environmental destruction. But *Flower's* narrative doesn't represent solastalgia merely through imagery or metaphor. It induces solastalgia through a corrupted montage. Your body's learned associations become weapons against you. The landscape you learned to trust betrays you. Notice what makes this powerful, it's not introducing new mechanics. You don't suddenly have health bars. The montage structure stays identical, simultaneous visual-audio-physical fusion still occurs. Only the content inverts. This proves that the montage itself carries narrative meaning independent of what it depicts. The form has become inseparable from the narrative.

Jenova Chen, *Flower's* creative director, has once talked about a principle he calls "Interactive Romanticism." Drawing from N.C. Wyeth's romantic paintings, Chen understood that romantic art achieves emotional truth through two techniques: abstraction and exaggeration. They capture emotion by abstracting away unnecessary detail and exaggerating what matters. A storm becomes impossibly dark. A figure becomes impossibly small against the landscape. The painting doesn't show reality, it shows how reality feels.

*Flower* stays true to the principle. What gets abstracted? No text. No timer. No score counts. What gets exaggerated? Scale. Vulnerability. Connection. The walls loom high. The fields stretch endlessly. A single petal becomes hundreds, creating a visible ribbon of collective action. The sensational restoration from the kinesthetic montage is exaggerated up to the point where players just can't miss it. Chen recognized that players are always seeking for maximum feedback, just like newborn babies in a new environment, they gravitate toward whatever produces the strongest response. "By providing feedback for the things you want to encourage, and by minimizing feedback on the actions you don't want to see, you can actually quite control the player's behavior in the game," Chen explained.

The kinesthetic montage serves this principle perfectly. By fusing sensory feedback so completely, *Flower* creates moments in the narrative where players don't consciously analyze connections of any sorts, they simply feel them and are encouraged to do even more of those due to the maximized feedback. The game's narrative abstracts the intellectual distance and exaggerates the somatic presence, to make emotional truth feelable more in the body than in the mind.

## Strongest Element

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**Blake's second line: *And a Heaven in a Wild Flower.***

The strongest element is *Flower's* proof that kinesthetic montage can carry narrative alone, even without fallbacks. Most games use sensory feedback to enhance stories told through other means. *The Last of Us* has beautiful sound design, but remove the audio and you will still understand Joel and Ellie's journey through dialogue. *Black Myth: Wukong* delivers a spectacular combat feel and visual spectacles, but most narrative of the Destined One's journey unfolds through cutscenes that exist outside of the combat.

*Flower* has no safety net. Remove the kinesthetic montage, and no narrative remains. The opening shows a window and a potted flower. The ending shows the window filled with bloomed flowers. Between: tens to hundreds of minutes of pure sensory fusion. Yet players understand. Grey becomes green. Dead earth revives. Industrial trauma heals. The meaning exists nowhere except in the simultaneous fusion of sight-sound-motion. The montage IS the narrative, not enhanced by it, not accompanied by it. This is where Blake's line completes: to find heaven in a wild flower requires looking into it, appreciating the infinite compressed within the small. *Flower* compresses an entire healing arc—confinement, freedom, trauma, transcendence—into the moment of touching a single bloom. Every petal is every petal. Every touch is every touch. The montage that fires in that instant contains the whole story, a narrative language native to games, impossible in any other media.

## Unsuccessful Element

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*Flower's* suffers from insufficient emotional range. The game speaks in extremes: serene or threatening, beautiful or broken, life or demise. Everything exists in opposition with no in-betweens. This limits the complexity. Where is melancholy? Where is uncertainty? Where is bittersweet acceptance? The levels could have introduced diminished chords, hesitant momentum, sensations that sometimes communicate the messy middle ground rather than always being the stark opposition. For a game about restoration, it at times lacks the vocabulary for depicting how the full picture of healing should happen. For instance, the awkward regrowth, the fragile new shoots, the slow uncertain recovery. *Flower* conveys triumph and trauma powerfully, but it has never gotten a chance to express the vulnerable, complicated feelings that exist between those extremes. The emotional palette is vivid but limited to primary colors.

## Highlight

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**Blake's third line: *Hold Infinity in the Palm of your Hand.***

This is the reversal. The first pylon in the final level. I hesitated before entering the cityscape. The very same structure that shocked me everywhere just now. My body remembers. I

approach the first pylon slowly, hands tense on the controller, anticipating shock-buzz-jolt. I touch it. But instead, a new montage fires:

- Visual: The pylon shatters into geometric fragments, dissolving into light particles
- Auditory: A crystalline chime, bright and sustained
- Physical: Satisfying rumbles

This is Aristotle's peripeteia, or more well-known as the reversal of fortune, but one happening in my nervous system. The fear encoded through the previous kinesthetic montage releases through an opposite montage, inducing a catharsis at the neurological level. The genius: using the same structure for opposite meanings. The montage form that created trauma now creates triumph. The sensory fusion that taught danger now teaches power. Setup and payoff, condition and subversion, all through kinesthetic montage.

This moment holds infinity because it contains every moment that came before. The ten minutes of fear conditioning, the other forty minutes of joy conditioning, all collapse into this single touch. Past and future compressed into present. The entire arc of healing, suffering, recovery, transcendence, they all exist in one crystalline chime. My body experiences the reversal before my mind can process it. You don't see a character feel relief. You feel the relief. The montage bypasses representation entirely.

## Critical Reception

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**GameSpot review by Kevin VanOrd (Score: 9/10, GREAT):** VanOrd celebrates *Flower* as a work of visual elegance that transcends its identity as a game. He emphasizes how the experience uses "music and motion to carry you across pastoral lands on a powerful emotional arc," noting that players become "musical collaborators" by composing countermelodies through *Flower* patterns. VanOrd dismisses criticisms of *Flower* as "not a game," arguing that its story "emerges purely through gameplay and level design." Most significantly, VanOrd recognizes that "the power comes not from accomplishing tasks but in the very act of moving and existing," identifying the core of *Flower's* narrative innovation.

**Destructoid review by Brad Nicholson and Anthony Burch (Score: 8/10):** The dual review captures divergent player experiences with *Flower's* emotional design. Nicholson describes the game as "divine," praising how it "tickles the senses and stimulates an emotional response" that replaced his stress with "a child-like sense of excitement." He notes the presentation's elegance matching the gameplay, with *Flowers* "arranged in sensible patterns designed to take you on an atmospheric journey." However, Burch offers a more critical perspective, lamenting that a big part of the game involves "tedious, unnecessary" collect-a-thon objectives. The split review demonstrates how *Flower's* wordless narrative and kinesthetic

approach affects players differently based on their willingness to surrender to its sensory narrative language.

## **Lessons**

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### **1. Small Teams Can Tell Big Stories Through Constraint Levering**

*Flower* was created by less than ten people over two years on a limited budget. What *thatgamecompany* lacked in resources back then, they compensated for through extreme focus. One core loop: restore life to dead landscapes. One narrative technique: kinesthetic montage. This teaches narrative designers working with constraints a liberating truth: you don't always need branching dialogue trees, or forty-hour campaigns to tell meaningful stories. Yet you do need at least one thing done exceptionally well. The constraint becomes the innovation. For small teams with tight budgets: find your one thing and lever it. The single interaction that can contain your entire narrative. Then iterate on that interaction until it achieves montage, until multiple sensory channels fuse into a unified meaning. *Flower* proves that narrative depth could come from refinement, not scale alone.

### **2. Condition Before You Subvert: Patient Repetition Enables Powerful Reversals**

*Flower's* most heartfelt narrative moment—the pylon reversal in Level 6—works only because the game spent the time before that conditioning your body to fear those structures. This reveals a principle about kinesthetic montage: cathartic narrative beats require patient setup. Here's the math: You touch roughly 30-40 pylons in Level 5. Each reinforces "pylon = danger." By the time you enter Level 6, that association is carved into your muscle memory. This is narrative through Pavlovian conditioning. The game is teaching your nervous system to read a language, then using that language to narrate. But the language requires repetition to become fluent. For narrative designers: if you want to subvert player expectations through gameplay, first establish those expectations through sustained repetition. Then, and only then, can you invert it for maximum impact. Setup and payoff, measured in repetitions, not just in beats.

### **3. Make the Form the Story: When Structure and Content Become Indistinguishable**

Most games use mechanics to serve story. *Flower* makes the mechanic be the narrative. The game's narrative, ecological restoration through connection, is inseparable from its technique of creating meaning through sensory fusion. The mechanic says, fragmented pieces (individual petals) gain power through connection (forming a collective). The narrative says, fragmented sensations (sight, sound, touch) gain meaning through fusion

(becoming kinesthetic montage). When you touch a flower and it blooms, you're not just seeing a metaphor for restoration, you're the restoration. For narrative designers: don't just look for mechanics that support your theme. Look for mechanics that are your theme. That becomes the purest form of ludonarrative resonance where you cannot separate what the game is saying from how it says it. This is why kinesthetic montage matters: it's a narrative technique where form and content could become indistinguishable.

## Summation

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**Blake's final line: *And Eternity in an Hour.***

*Flow-er. Motion* and **stillness**. *Wind* and **landscape**. The title holds both.

*Flower* gives games kinesthetic montage: meaning through fusion. Not understanding in the mind but knowledge in the body. Not images editing together but sensations collapsing together. Blake asked us to hold eternity in an hour. *Flower* answers: you already do. In sixty minutes of gameplay, *Flower* teaches what healing feels like. Not through words but through the language your body speaks: color-sound-motion as one. Not story alongside gameplay but narrative as gameplay. Not representing restoration but being restoration. This paper tried to honor how the game's poetic narrative outlook is told: say more with less, a pattern bold. Where form and content fuse, truth be told, where each touch contains every touch, meadow in the petal's hold. Short in length, but truly gold.

## Citations

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