

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: *Deltarune*
Platform: Windows, MacOS, Nintendo Switch, PS4
Genre: RPG
Release Date: October 31, 2018
Developer: Toby Fox
Publisher: Toby Fox
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Toby Fox

Overview

Deltarune is not quite a sequel to *Undertale* – both are RPGs that alternate between bullet-hell turn-based combat sequences, in-world puzzles, and narrative-heavy chunks of dialogue. Although it shares a few characters and common themes as its predecessor, *Deltarune* is not a continuation or prequel by any means. Rather, the game is more like an alternate universe, imagining a different way the timeline could have gone.

Deltarune follows Kris and Susie, a human and a monster from the normal world who find themselves trapped in a strange dark world, wrapped up in a prophecy and unable to return home until they achieve their destinies. With the balance between Light and Dark mysteriously disrupted, Kris and Susie from one world along with Ralsei from the dark world are the ones prophesied to restore balance and save the world.

Throughout the Dark World, the main trio encounter creatures that wish to keep them from restoring balance, forming intricate bonds with each other and opponents, switching sides, and raising questions about fate and choices. At its core, *Deltarune* is about the characters and their arcs, slowly learning from one another and becoming better people as they work towards fulfilling the prophesy and returning home.

Characters

- **KRIS** – The player avatar, human. Kris is gender neutral, age-unknown other than the fact that they attend school, almost completely expressionless – and they never speak throughout the duration of the game. Other characters speak to Kris; they just never respond or vocalize. Kris lives with their mother, Toriel. Much of who Kris is in the game is defined through the player's actions while controlling them – we don't know much about Kris because we play as Kris and make their

- choices for them for the duration. They are the “leader” of the party, meaning they make the strategical decisions in combat for the other party members, simply pointing to tell other party members when to attack/heal/etc.
- **SUSIE** – An NPC party member, monster. Susie is a large, intimidating, purple-reptile-esc monster in the same class at school as Kris. She’s the school bully, on her last strike before being expelled. Angry and rude, when she finds herself in the Dark World, she initially goes her own way, ignoring any direction given by the player during combat in favor of relentlessly attacking anyone she comes across, her violence driving her to try to work alone and fight her way through everything. While still maintaining her “hit with axe first, ask questions never” attitude, she eventually comes to befriend Lancer and realize that always fighting can hurt the people she cares about, showing restraint and cooperating with the party.
 - **RALSEI** – An NPC party member, “Prince of Dark.” Friendly and helpful to fault, Ralsei lives in the Dark World and has heard the prophesy about himself and a human and monster from the Light World his whole life. He immediately joins the party, ready to journey to seal the Dark Fountain that threatens the balance between Light and Dark. Ralsei believes that every encounter can be ended without fighting, strongly encouraging Kris to act or pacify worn-down opponents with magic instead of killing them. He believes a happy ending is possible for EVERYONE, not just the party members, if Kris avoids fighting.
 - **LANCER** – An NPC, non-party member. Lancer is the child of the King who opened the Dark Fountain, and as such, wants to stop the trio from fulfilling their destinies and foiling his father’s plan; however, Lancer is incredibly inept at this. Much like a child pretending to be evil, his attempts at intimidation and smack talk are wildly comical, even as he throws himself at them wholeheartedly. Seeing Susie’s actually threatening nature, he comes to admire her, eventually befriend her, followed by the rest of the party. He sees that his father and friends have opposing goals that will likely lead to a confrontation in which either or both parties will be killed, thus he tries to keep the two apart.
 - **THE KING** – An NPC, the Final Boss. The King is Lancer’s father and the one who opened the Dark Fountain. He seeks to throw the world into disarray by shifting the balance in favor of the Dark. While the party constantly runs into his goons and underlings, the player doesn’t meet the King until the end of the game in a massive boss fight.

Breakdown

In *Deltarune*, the player experiences the story as Kris. Kris begins the game in the real world by going to school and promptly being partnered up with the school bully, Susie, for a class project before the teacher sends the two run an errand to get more supplies from the supply closet down the hall. In the hallway, Susie threatens to kill Kris just because their quiet nature “pisses [her] off,” slamming them against the wall and telling them, “In case you haven’t noticed, your choices don’t matter.” The two walk to the dark supply closet, but the door closes behind them and the floor falls away. In true *Alice and Wonderland* fashion, the two wake up in a strange Dark World with no way of returning home.

Here, Kris and Susie meet Ralsei, who explains the prophesy about the three of them and that they must restore balance and save the world. We also meet Lancer, who introduces himself as the bad guy here to stop you from sealing the Dark Fountain, which just so happens to be the only way you can return home. Ralsei asks Kris and Susie to join the quest to save the world. Susie promptly refuses, leaving the party and attempting to find her own way. Ralsei falls in behind Kris, joining the party and emphasizing that your choices *do* matter. While your fates may be set and your goal unmoving, the path you choose to take will affect the world around you, saying, “This world is full of all kinds of people, Kris. In the end, how we treat them makes all the difference,” imploring you to choose a path of non-violence. This speaks to the nature of the game narrative itself: while the coding of the game places limits on the narrative being told, the player still shapes their own experience based on the choices they make along the way.

With the brunt of the exposition of the game behind you, the next leg of the game is the “journey.” Since some obstacles can only be passed with all three of you, this sees Susie begrudgingly join the party, promptly proceeding to attack during every turn in combat no matter what you tell her to do, often times causing more harm than good. **This serves as an amazing bridge between narrative and gameplay**; in dialogue and cutscenes, Susie’s character and motivations are established: she doesn’t take orders from others well and refuses to let her walls down. Her characterization bleeds into the RPG combat sequences in the form of her refusing to listen to anything you tell her to do. This forces the player to strategize *around* Susie’s constant attacks, since her killing any opponent means the player is stopped from achieving the “happiest” possible ending. In one specific instance, a fight gets harder because of Susie’s constant attacks as it causes the enemy to regroup and come back with much stronger attacks. Susie even briefly leaves the party to join Lancer’s side as an outright antagonistic force, realizing her M.O. doesn’t exactly align with the typical definition of “being a good guy.” After hearing Susie drill early in the game that your choices don’t matter, her constant rebellion against her destiny and choosing to work how she wants, often times *against* her own destiny, suggests otherwise to the player, building towards the big central question of “Do the choices you make *matter*?”

The party continues to encounter Lancer throughout their journey. Lancer, while starting out working against the party, is quickly established as very comedic and non-threatening. His tactics at getting the party to stop are often so inept that at one point Ralsei can’t help but give Lancer advice on how to improve, even if it means there’s a chance the next encounter with him may be tougher. In addition, because of Susie’s genuinely intimidating nature, Lancer greatly admires Susie, wanting to be as threatening as her. Having never had this type of reaction to her threats, Susie doesn’t know how to respond at first, eventually growing to befriend Lancer.

From a few minutes into the Dark World up until reaching the roof of the castle, “The Journey” takes up the brunt of the narrative’s run-time. It’s amongst these puzzles, combat encounters, and other obstacles that the character arcs of Susie, Lancer, and Ralsei unfold around the player. Each character has a different dynamic with all of the

other characters, and their attitudes and alliances are always shifting and growing. Susie leaves the party to join Lancer because Ralsei reprimands her, but she rejoins the party later after Lancer, her newfound friend, comes to like Ralsei and Kris and wishes to stop fighting them. Lancer goes from attacking the party to walking alongside you as you journey to the castle, only to then lock the party in the dungeon at one point in a desperate bid to protect his new friends from potentially getting killed in the confrontation with his father, the King. Ralsei spends the whole game believing that every single person can be reasoned with and that *everyone* can get a happy ending, butting heads with Susie for fighting everyone; however, by the end, the two of them come to realize that neither extreme is always right. Ralsei admits that some people, like the King, are not kind, and will stab you in the back if you extend your help to them, and Susie realizes that there are some people you have to fight, “But if you never let your guard down, you might hurt someone you care about.” **These three characters feeding off of and shaping each other over the course of the story is one of the most memorable things about the whole narrative.**

Throughout the game, the player encounters numerous “enemies” in classic RPG-style combat; however, each of these opponents is treated like an individual to be reasoned with and spoken to instead of just blindly attacking. With nearly every encounter, it comes to light that the opponent was only attacking you because the King ordered them to do so. While the player is afforded the choice of what to do, if every opponent is spared and each battle is ended without killing, then the end of the game shows everyone in the kingdom rallying and rushing in at the end of the final fight to save your party from the king’s wrath, overthrowing him. Beating the game by defeating the King to seal the Dark Fountain has always been the “end,” but the player’s choices shape how that final scene plays out.

For a game with really only one ending (defeating the King) and no real branches in the narrative, the whole story is steeped in themes about choice and the idea that what you do *matters*. On the frequently asked questions pages for the game, one of the questions posed asks since there’s only one ending, then does nothing the player does matter? The creator, Toby Fox, answers with, **“There’s something more important than reaching the end.”** And truly, it’s the *story* that’s told along the way and how the player interacts with the narrative, watching it unfold around them, that really makes the game worth playing.

Strongest Element

The strongest element of *Deltarune*’s narrative is its NPC character arcs. The depth and care that *Deltarune* puts into its major non-player characters is incredible. Susie’s evolution from violent school bully to caring friend; Lancer growing from enemy to friend and standing up to his father on your behalf; Ralsei’s realization that kindness doesn’t always win and that some people are just bad and won’t be reasoned with. All of these weave together, feeding off each other, creating the amazing player experience of watching these NPCs grow, change, and evolve as people in response to each other and events you encounter together.

Unsuccessful Element

Throughout the game, we are exposed to this idea that we don't choose who we are in life in combination with themes of fate and choice. We even spend time *before* the beginning of the game in a standard "create a character" window, designing a person and picking a personality, only for the game to discard our creation, telling us that we can't choose who we are in the world and that we will be playing as Kris. The theme of choice is everywhere and inescapable, starting the second you boot up the game and until the credits roll.

With the exception of one scene.

At the very end of the game, there is a post-credits cutscene that feels like it undercuts all these amazingly impactful themes. After Kris and Susie have returned to the Light World, we control Kris as they goes home to their mother and go to bed, ending the game. The short credits roll before we are shown a cutscene back in Kris' room in the middle of the night. Kris awakes, falling out of bed and stumbling slowly and painfully to the center of their room. They reach into their own chest and rip out their soul, represented by a small heart - the very thing we've been using through the entire game to control Kris, direct the rest of the party, and survive combat encounters. They throw their soul into a cage in the corner of the room. Here, the player can still control the soul, moving it about the confines of the cage; Kris, on the other hand, is no longer responding to player inputs. They brandish a knife, their eyes glinting as they smile with evil intent, the first expression we've seen from them the entire game. Then, the screen fades to black. The game is over, shutting itself down.

This ending scene is supposed to act much like a Marvel post-credits scene: it sows the seeds for a sequel or continuation by teasing future events. In addition, it reframes some of the events of the game by raising a number of questions. Perhaps we have not been Kris this whole time, but rather overshadowing and controlling Kris like a puppet. Do they have their own separate wants and goals and personality apart from the actions we took as them during the game? Are the themes about choice and free will about Kris, not having any choice or voice outside of the player, or about the player, who has to follow the set narrative of the game?

While these are all valid questions that can cause the player to think deeper about the game, I feel like this scene causes more of a misstep steeped in confusion rather than a shining final moment of introspection. Right before the credits roll, I'm left with a warm feeling in my chest, tears pricking at the corners of my eyes from the heartfelt ending. Two minutes later, after the final cutscene, all these feelings are undercut, brushed aside by the very abrupt shift, leaving me wondering *Wait, what? What was that all about?* before googling the ending to see if I missed something.

Since the next chapter of the story isn't out yet, there's no way to know if this is a crucial scene in the over-arching narrative of the games or not. Without knowing how the story progresses beyond this scene, I can think of two simple(ish) ways to fix this feeling of tonal whiplash. Either cut the scene entirely and leave the sequel's story in the sequel, or

sprinkle in hints throughout the game that this scene might be coming at the end, making it less jarring while still maintaining aspects of the twist.

Highlight

While filled with numerous memorable moments, the pinnacle moment comes during a cut-scene, the only scene of the game that we see without Kris present. After being captured and thrown in the dungeon of the castle, Susie manages to escape her cell and goes to find a way to free Ralsei and Kris. When Susie leaves, the game shows us a cut-scene of what happens while she's away from the party.

While searching for a way out, she overhears Lancer telling the guards to keep the three of you locked up down there forever, realizing someone she thought of as her first real friend was the one who ordered them to be imprisoned. Betrayed, she confronts Lancer, who stands in her way. Returning to her darker demeanor from earlier parts of the game, pulling out her axe and threatening to kill him if he doesn't get out of her way. He continues to stand sadly, so she begins attacking him, landing hit after hit. However, Lancer does not attack back – even attempting to step in front of his attacks, the attacks simply weave around her. Growing angrier, Susie shouts, “If you wanna lie down and die, THEN DIE,” swinging her axe for what looks to be a killing blow.

But she misses. She quietly admits that she really doesn't want to kill her friend, begging him to just move. Lancer explains that if he lets the party continue, they'll confront his father, likely killing each other. At least if he keeps them locked up, his friends won't have to die.

Susie promises not to kill the King, convincing Lancer that they can seal the Dark Fountain without anyone having to die. Lancer agrees and goes up to the roof ahead of the party to begin attempting to reason with his father.

This single scene is the turning point for both Lancer's and Susie's character arcs. While at the beginning, Lancer would attack your party, from here on out, Lancer throws his full support behind you, trusting you to not kill his father. Susie, on the other hand, has attacked every single opponent or obstacle up to this point, regardless of attempts at persuading her to do otherwise. Now, she agrees to cooperate with the rest of the party and not just blindly attack, saying, “Sometimes, there are people you just have to fight. But if you never let your guard down, you might hurt someone you care about.” I love these themes of character growth and *genuine* change repeated over and over again, and this one scene is the best example of the arcs the characters make over the course of the game. It comes to a head in a tense moment, unstoppable force meeting immovable object – but both Lancer and Susie realize that changing their stance and *growing* is more important than sticking to their guns if it means saving a friend.

Critical Reception

Looking at general reception, the vast majority of player response is overwhelmingly positive, with user reviews on Metacritic averaging around 8/10. I personally remember my social media feeds blowing up at the time as many of my friends who played raved about the game. This view is mostly mirrored with *Polygon*'s Allegra Frank review, saying, “*Deltarune* is a refreshing return... There’s never room to complain about more *Undertale*.” She did not give the game a numerical score.

Nintendo Life's Mitch Vogel wasn't quite as favorable, giving the game a 7/10, saying, “At worst, *Deltarune* Chapter 1 is just a smaller and shallower version of *Undertale*; at best, it's a promising glimpse into a much more ambitious project that will hopefully grow to escape the shadow of its forerunner.” Most negative comments about *Deltarune* stem from not knowing when the next installment will be released or comparing it to its predecessor, *Undertale*.

Lessons

- Strong, compelling NPCs with clear goals and character arcs go a long way in making the world and characters feel *alive*, bringing the player into the world of the game. (Examples in *Strongest Element* section)
- While setting up a franchise and creating intrigue for future installments may be key to the game's future success, there are more effective ways to do so than an unclear post-credits that undercuts the feelings and themes from the game itself. (Example in *Unsuccessful Element* section)
- By putting the player of the game in a similar situation to the player character, the creator can instill a great deal of investment and solidarity in the player towards the character, which goes a long way if the player isn't playing “themselves.” Example from the game: on the player side of things, the game tells the player that they can't choose who they are and you don't get to choose what happens – they are limited to the code and narrative of the game. On the player-character side, Kris is told repeatedly throughout the game that their choices don't matter. There is one moment early in game where they are offered one yes/no screen to answer a question, but the screen disappears almost immediately before they can answer as they are again told that their choices don't matter.
- NPC choices and personalities can have a huge impact on gameplay, tying the gameplay and story that much closer together. Example from the game: Susie is very violent and fights everyone in her way without discretion, even going against strategies and directions given by the player. This means during RPG combat, the player must strategize around Susie's attacks in addition to the opponent's, further cementing Susie's character and giving her change of heart later much more weight as it changes the way the game is played.

Summation

Ultimately, *Deltarune* is a rich tapestry in terms of character. From their ever-evolving goals and dynamics to the lessons they learn along the way, each character feels like a

fully-realized living creation. With the added combination of the compelling narrative drive and themes dealing with choice, the elements tie together nicely to create an “emotionally invested” gameplay experience for the player. To put it all in less than ten words: strong, dynamic supporting characters go far in strengthening player investment.