

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Yume Nikki
Platform: Microsoft Windows
Genre: Adventure, Psychological horror
Release Date: June 26, 2004
Developer: Kikiyama
Publisher: Playism, Active Gaming Media
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Kikiyama

Overview

Yume Nikki is a psychological horror adventure game about Madotsuki, a young girl who refuses to leave her room and explores vivid and often scary worlds in her dreams. The narrative is loosely framed, and much of the content is open to interpretation. Her dreams contain a wide variety of strange characters, monsters, and landscapes. Madotsuki searches her peculiar surreal dream world for hidden effects. Once all the effects are found, Madotsuki jumps to her death off of her bedroom balcony.

Characters

While there are dozens of mysterious and unnamed characters in the game, only three actually are named: Madotsuki, Monoe, and Monoko. Madotsuki is the only one who is officially named within the game, the other two are revealed to have names in the game files.

- **Madotsuki:** She is a young girl who refuses to leave her room, spending all her time sleeping or playing video games. She never talks and is very lonely. She can turn into the effects that she picks up; many of which are purely aesthetic, suggesting she has imagined different personalities for herself. She is lost in her own thoughts and appears to be very depressed.

- **Monoe and Monoko:** Monoe is found by killing a ghost in a dark tunnel. Upon interacting with her, Monoe's face fades in and out and she disappears. Monoko is found in the desert. When the stoplight effect is used on her she grows five arms and starts bouncing and spinning. Both Monoe and Monoko are dressed in school uniforms and are depicted only in black and white. The most common interpretation is that the three girls are sisters, due to their similar names. Personally, I think that the uniforms indicate that they are Madotsuki's classmates, the black and white art suggesting that the girls might be dead. The fading in and out along with gruesome animations suggest that these might be ghosts of girls who have committed suicide and are now haunting Madotsuki's dreams.
- **Toriningen:** The Toriningen have been given this name by fans because the word means "bird-like" in Japanese. These are young girls with pointy noses that appear at many points throughout the world. The Toriningen are tall, withered girls who will chase and kill Madotsuki if she gets too close. There is one scene in the desert where Madotsuki can watch three Toriningen dance while having a picnic, but there is a physical barrier that prevents her from getting close. These girls normally terrorize Madotsuki, and this scene is quite sad as it appears Madotsuki feels left out of their picnic.
- **Others:** There are countless monsters and characters in this game that only appear once and signify different feelings, ideas, and people from Madotsuki's life. Almost every character appears to reject or ignore Madotsuki.

Breakdown

Yume Nikki has two main places: the waking world, and the dream world. Madotsuki starts in the waking world, goes to sleep and explores her dream world, then is able to pinch her cheek and wake up and repeat the cycle.

Waking World

While the dream world is a surreal horror adventure game, the waking world is quite the opposite. As the game starts, the scene is wordlessly depicted: Madotsuki is a young girl

who refuses to leave her room. All she is able to do is play a small video game, write in her journal, walk onto her balcony, and go to sleep. Through slowly exploring her dreams and discovering effects we learn more about Madotsuki; individually many of the scenes seem nonsensical but together they form a complex narrative. After collecting all the effects in the dream world, she wakes up, and for the first time something has changed in the waking world: a step stool appears next to the balcony. She is now able to jump off, and the credits roll as a final trip to the dream world.

The stark waking world is directly juxtaposed against the colorful and surreal dream world and waking up is quite jarring. Madotsuki spends, by far, the majority of the game in her colorful dream world, and there are many scenarios that force the player to bring her back to the waking world. Sometimes pathways within the dream world don't have exits and there is no other way to get back other than to wake up and start over. Other times, she may get trapped in a small room without doors. There are evil looking girls strewn throughout the world, and if one of them touches Madotsuki she will be killed and forced to wake up.

Dream World

Every night when Madotsuki goes to sleep she wakes up in the Door Room, which has twelve different doorways. She searches through them, looking for effects that will allow her to transform. There is no time limit on wandering through her dreams; often one door will lead to many other unpredictable places. Often effects can be hidden within labyrinth-like conjunctures of areas, and due to the randomness of the game it can be extremely difficult to find the same place twice.

Doorways

There are twelve doorways that depict different aspects of Madotsuki's mind.

- **Number World:** The first door is the Number World and leads to a bright maze filled with numbers. This could signify her feeling lost in school, and lack of ability to keep up with the other students. A hidden door reveals a large room so full of monsters that Madotsuki will need to stab them to view the strange blue

mask at the bottom of the room, demonstrating her desire to be special and stand out from the crowd. The numbers on the floor have no significance and at the bottom of the map is a river that cannot be crossed, suggesting Madotsuki's frustration with the lack of control over obstacles in her life.

- **Neon World:** The second door leads to the Neon World; this is a large world filled with neon tiles that make noise when walked upon. This resembles a city and how overwhelming the noise can be. It leads to Hell, an area that can be accessed from several places throughout the game, but neon world is the most straightforward. Hell is a very large maze-like area with connections to a few smaller nightmarish areas. The most notable smaller area is a forest with a twitching man in the middle of the road who looks to have been hit by a car. This suggests that Madotsuki knows someone who died this way, or possibly saw this scene unfold in real life. This is one explanation as to why there are so many dismembered and bloody body parts strewn throughout her dreams.
- **Shield Folk World:** This door leads to a world filled with characters with shields resembling Aztecs. This represents Madotsuki's desire to feel protected from the problems in her life. This one of the few rooms in the game that only leads to only one place: the Static World. This is a small area that is filled with what looks like TV static, which leads to a pixel game that reflects the art and room style of *Earthbound*, which then leads to a large underground dungeon. This series of rooms implies Madotsuki's reflection of herself as a video game character and imagining herself strong enough to defeat the enemies around her. *Earthbound* is a game about a group of kids capable of defeating every kind of evil monster, and Madotsuki would like to imagine herself as one of them.
- **Candle World:** The candle world is one of the most mysterious places in the game, there is a bed that has a chance of taking Madotsuki to a long staircase that will take her to a spaceship. This room could simply represent a feeling of being lost, and the spaceship likely represents her desire to escape to another world entirely.
- **Eyeball World:** This world is filled with gore and dismembered body parts. Madotsuki seems to have lots of built up rage that manifests in violent imagery,

- this is a common theme throughout the game. She has no outlet for her anger, she feels isolated and alone with her feelings.
- **Graffiti World:** This world has hundreds of panels that play music when stepped upon. This location also resembles the Hell World mentioned earlier. The repeating theme of noisy panels suggests that Madotsuki strongly dislikes noise and is traumatized by settings where she is trapped in a loud space. Her extreme sensitivity to sound suggests Madotsuki might have autism which could contribute to her struggle to fit in.
 - **Mural World:** This world is filled with large neon panels decorated with strange human-like art on them. There are two effects in this room: The Long Hair and the Blonde Hair effect. These two effects turn Madotsuki into a girl with long blond hair. It is likely that this room is about self-image, and her desire to feel beautiful. It has an entrance to The Sewers, a place similarly adorned with large murals. However, these murals are of dark twisted monsters, showing a further deterioration of Madotsuki's self-image.
 - **Snow World:** Snow World is a large snowy landscape with 5 scattered igloos. No one in this world talks to Madotsuki, and this world is likely about the difficulties of finding people who will accept her. There is a young blond girl in a faraway igloo that stands out because her art style, color palette, and age are reminiscent of Madotsuki; this girl is also solitary. However, she completely ignores Madotsuki and there is a one in sixty-four chance of a demon appearing in her house when the lights are turned off. This suggests that Madotsuki is not alone in her loneliness, and that other characters are struggling with their inner demons as well. It is unclear if knowing this gives Madotsuki comfort or makes her feel just as alone.
 - **Dark World:** This world is completely dark, although the lantern effect will reveal patterns on the ground. The knife effect can be found here, and can be used to kill any other character, although they will come back the next night. This room could simply represent a visualization of Madotsuki's depression. It has a portal to the largest, most desolate location in *Yume Nikki*: The Wilderness. This area is a dry, desolate place that is difficult to navigate due to weeds scattered

everywhere. This area is an empty and tiring part of Madotsuki's imagination and can be very frustrating to explore. It leads the White Desert, the gruesome black and white parallel of The Wilderness. The juxtaposition of these two locations reveals a sense of violence and rebellion against the boring tedium of having no foreseeable destination.

- **Puddle World:** This world has almost nothing to interact with, although the umbrella effect can be found here. It signifies monotony, it is barren except for puddles and lampposts sporadically placed.
- **Block World:** This room is a maze filled with different cube like structures and the perspective in this room makes it quite confusing to navigate. This room represents Madotsuki's struggle to cope with and solve her issues. There is also a men's restroom in here that she can go into and use, hinting that she may be transgender. This is not the only reference to Madotsuki's struggle with identity. Some of her nightmares are haunted with phallic shaped characters, suggesting possible past sexual trauma. Dismembered body parts are a common theme throughout the game, and this could be also be a potential explanation.
- **Forest World:** This room is an open forest area filled with frog characters. There isn't much to this world, it isn't very large and there is only a frog effect to be found. Because this is one of the two doors closest to the entrance its purpose may simply be an introduction to the structure of the game, when I played *Yume Nikki* for the first time it was the first place I went.

Looping Rooms

Navigating the world of *Yume Nikki* is extremely difficult, mirroring Madotsuki's struggle. If she wanders in any cardinal direction she will eventually loop back to the other side, and in order to find different doors and portals she needs to make seemingly random turns within each map. Sometimes she will need to walk through a specific tunnel or interact just the right amount of times with an object to reveal a door. This structure allows the narrative of truly wandering and feeling lost to be very clearly communicated.

Strongest Element

The best part of *Yume Nikki* is its ability to directly convey specific feelings through simply walking. There is no dialogue, there is no plotline, the narrative simply unfolds through each unique playthrough. The world slowly becomes more familiar, and with that comes an understanding of the dark themes in the game. On the surface *Yume Nikki* is a walking simulator, but once Madotsuki finds effects and begins to interact with the world it turns into an adventure game.

Unsuccessful Element

Part of what makes *Yume Nikki* so unique is that every player's experience with the game is dramatically different, mainly because there are dozens of events in the game that have a relatively low chance of happening during any particular night. The events range anywhere from a one in three chance for a hidden door to appear, to a one in sixty-four chance for a character to appear.

This distracts from the narrative of the game because it requires anyone who wants to uncover the full narrative of the game to either look through fan sites or spend hundreds of hours in the game attempting to uncover every single corner of Madotsuki's dreams. Players trying to find every effect completely by themselves will likely never see the ending of the game. The narrative would feel more natural and dreamlike if there wasn't this frustrating aspect of having to leave and enter a room fifty times to try and get a hidden door to appear. While there is a very satisfying aspect to the world randomly moving and changing because dreams work in a similar way, it is nearly impossible for anyone to actually see the horrific and beautiful ending of the game.

Highlight

There are many short cutscenes throughout the game, the most dramatic being the end when Madotsuki jumps off her balcony and jellyfish sing above her dead body. However, the moment that stands out most to me is a one that breaks through to the crux of Madotsuki's fate, and ultimately reveals why she decides to kill herself.

Every night there is a one in three chance of an escalator up to a rooftop appearing in a mysterious empty mall. When she goes to the top, there is only a ledge overlooking a mountain landscape and a black cat sitting to the side watching. When she goes to the edge and uses the witch effect she jumps off, and the camera cuts to a 2D side-scroller action game where Madotsuki is flying on a broomstick. She can move up and down in the sky, and when she interacts with the scene again it cuts to black and she wakes up. This scene directly parallels Madotsuki's gruesome final suicide scene, but instead depicts her desire to be free in a beautiful and hopeful way. As this is the only part of the game where the controls change, the scene is a breath of fresh air from the repetitive and often monotonous gameplay.

There are relatively few scenes in *Yume Nikki* where the art style changes, generally the scenes driven the most by Madotsuki's emotions change the pixel art resolution. In this scene, the landscape is realistic, and the mountains are painting-like. This shows that this scene is very emotionally driven, and unlike most of the game, it feels very positive and optimistic. The scene is foreshadowing her death but seeing her so happy to break the pattern of her life helps shape the narrative of how suicide is setting her free.

Critical Reception

Most critics agree that the enjoyment of this game is very dependent on taste, it can be both frustrating and confusing up through the end. It has a cult following and appeals to a very specific demographic of fans that endlessly speculate on the meanings hidden within this game. Most critics completely agree that the game truly feels like wandering a dream, but whether they enjoyed it or understood it is a bit divisive. The game wasn't released on Steam until 2018, and therefore there are not many reputable critic reviews.

Breaking Cannon's Orion gives the game an 8.8, praising the game for its endless vivid imagery and exploration. He claims the game has no plot and compares the game to an abstract painting. He admits the game is fascinating but is not interested in unraveling its hidden messages.

In a TigSource article Derek Yu compared the game to Earthbound visually for its mix of elements and colorful graphics. He says the lack of dialogue, “filled him with dread” and many other players seem to share this sentiment. The game is at its core a psychological horror game, and players either feel this sense of what Madotsuki is going through or are left baffled and confused.

Lessons

- **Environmental Storytelling:** There is absolutely no dialogue in this game, and the game would lose much impact if there was. This game emphasizes how an environment can convey a specific feeling better than words, because it allows the player to put themselves in that specific place. Environments trigger very specific emotions and memories, and many games can muddle this with too much dialogue.
- **Surrealism:** Almost nothing in *Yume Nikki* is to be taken completely literally, and the game embodies surrealism as a genre: a representation of the subconscious through physical objects. Many recent games are very literal, a quick google search of surreal games comes up nearly empty. I think that there is a lot of room for game development within this genre.
- **Randomness:** As mentioned before, the random aspect of this game is its weakest mechanic. It takes away from the narrative as it prevents the player from experiencing a lot of it. In a game about endless exploration, grinding to get a cutscene doesn't feel in line with the gameplay.
- **Repetitive Structure:** The structure of this game is relatively simple for the amount of time that can be spent in the world of *Yume Nikki*. Indie games often feel overly repetitive in their efforts to create as much content as possible with very few resources. However, *Yume Nikki* completely embraces this by encouraging the player to choose to go where they want, and there is an element of mystery behind every corner. You really never know what you are about to find in this game. The repetitively adds to the dreamlike experience of *Yume Nikki*.

Summation

Few games are able to convey such specific feelings as well as *Yume Nikki*. Although frustrating at times it truly simulates the feeling of dreaming. While there isn't much narrative development, it explores the core of its narrative incredibly thoroughly.

Through open world exploration each player experiences a unique journey, and in many ways the narrative is a large, complicated, emotionally driven puzzle. While the game has a strong cult following and the quirky characters can be endlessly speculated on, there isn't a preponderance of analysis on how every aspect of this game comes together to create a complete narrative experience.

Citations

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