

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: The World Ends With You
Platform: Nintendo DS
Genre: Action RPG
Release Date: July 26, 2007 (JP)
Developer: Square Enix and Jupiter
Publisher: Square Enix
Game Writer: Sachie Hirano

Overview

Neku Sakuraba is a teenager who's perfectly content to shut the rest of the world out. After he awakens in the crossroads of an alternate "Underground" dimension of the trendy district of Shibuya, Tokyo, he discovers he's been thrust into the "Reapers' Game" with his life and stolen memories at stake. Neku is forced to work alongside a girl named Shiki Misaki to survive, and slowly learns how to open up to others and embrace the world.

The World Ends With You (or "TWEWY") has a complex narrative with many characters working towards many different goals, all framed around an in-universe game. It was released for Nintendo DS in 2007 (2008 outside Japan) and received an iOS version subtitled "Solo Remix" in August of 2012 with combat reworked around a single screen.

Characters

The World Ends With You contains several different factions important to the story and world:

- **The Reapers** – These beings, identifiable by their black wings, run the Reapers' Game. The Reapers have a hierarchy, the highest level of which is the Composer. However, above even the Composer are Angels, recruited directly from exceptional Players. Reapers serve as the primary antagonists and must "erase" (i.e., obliterate) the Players to increase their lifespans, but they are not outright villains. They erase players as a job, not out of malice, and many Reapers are actually former players. Reapers, it should be noted, are not normally able to attack players directly and instead fight by summoning Noise.

- **Noise** – Noise are creatures that exist on the border of the Underground and Realground (i.e., the “real world”), creating obstacles for the Players and able to influence emotions of living people. Within the game itself, they are similar to random encounters, though apart from the story-based encounters, battles are initiated by the player and are not forced.
- **Players** – Humans who have died and entered the Reapers’ Game. Two players must make a Pact in order to prevent Noise from attacking and to be able to use pin-based “psychs,” a variety of powers that allow the Players to fight. The Players compete in a variety of missions to win back their entry fee, which is what they most value.

In addition to these three factions, *The World Ends With You* contains a substantial cast, and many of these characters are all working towards different goals. However, when we limit our characters to the ones with the greatest impact on the plot, the number becomes a bit more manageable.

- **Neku Sakuraba** – Neku is our antisocial protagonist and player character. His entry fee in the Reapers’ Game was his memories. He is a big fan of graffiti art and music—he’s constantly wearing his headphones. However, he tends to stay away from people, claiming that they only “drag you down.” This likely stems from a close friend’s death in an accident that occurred while said friend was on his way to meet Neku. Neku is easily the most dynamic character of the story, as much of it revolves around him learning to open up to others and grow as a person.
- **Shiki Misaki** – Neku’s first partner. She is a very fashion-savvy girl who is nevertheless very self-conscious. She harbors feelings of inferiority and jealousy towards her friend Eri, which is why she is surprised when her entry fee is her appearance, causing her to take on her friend’s appearance instead. Shiki is much more social than Neku and forces him into interaction with others, making her a key figure in his character development.
- **Yoshiya “Joshua” Kiryu** – Joshua is a smug, arrogant youth and Neku’s second partner. He is difficult to get along with, especially for Neku, though there are indications that he is consequently a very lonely person. He is later revealed to be the Composer in disguise checking on Neku, who he’s chosen as his proxy in a game between himself and the Conductor.
- **Daisukenojo “Beat” Bito** – Beat is a boisterous and somewhat dense teen whose heart and drive make up for his weaker traits. He joins the Reapers after his sister and partner Rhyme is erased in an attempt to save her life. However, when the deck is blatantly stacked against Neku his third time playing the game, he rejoins him and becomes Neku’s third partner.
- **Megumi Kitaniji** – The “Conductor” of the Reapers’ Game, meaning that he runs and organizes it. He is somewhat smug and condescending and is the most notable antagonist. He and the Composer are engaged in a game of their own to determine whether or not the Composer will destroy the Underground.
- **Sanae Hanekoma** – Also known as “Mr. H.” Hanekoma is a cool and laid-back man who functions as something of a mentor to Neku, offering him help and

advice when he most needs it. He is the “Producer,” an Angel who reports on the Reapers’ Game and make sure it runs smoothly. He appears to be just a supporting character, but it is likely that he is pulling all the strings.

Breakdown

The World Ends With You focuses on the antisocial Neku Sakuraba as he participates in the Reapers’ Game in an attempt to regain his life. The experience forces him through the painful process of coming out of his shell and growing as a person. Meanwhile, the Reapers’ Game slowly begins coming apart at the seams as a political battle royal comes to a head.

The inclusion of the Reapers’ Game in the story was a definite strength in terms of game design, as this framing device allowed the gameplay to provide explanations for many mechanics. Noise do not attack unless the player so chooses, because the pact that two Players make prevents them from doing so. Mission objectives come from a Game Master, who also serves as a “final boss” as a way of testing the Reapers’ Game’s Players. The huge shopping district is restricted to just a few shops because only those shops are marked with a sign that allows the otherwise invisible players to interact with the shopkeepers. Perhaps most notably, the Reapers put up literal invisible walls, allowing them to railroad players (both of TWEWY and the Reapers’ Game) to where they need to be. This last element is satisfyingly subverted in the final week, as Neku and Beat are able to use keys to bypass many walls, allowing them to go off of the in-game rails.

The game has a complex, multi-layered metaplot that is designed to be replayed. Certain scenes take on entirely new meanings once a player knows that Joshua is the Composer or that Kitoniji does not currently have the power to restore people to life. To encourage re-experiencing the story, the game offers incentives in the form of unlockable Secret Reports that elaborate on the plot and the world. It generally takes two or three playthroughs to fully understand, and TWEWY makes sure that the experience is fresh every time. However, despite its complexity, the story does not alienate players, as it also focuses on Neku’s deeply personal journey, which is straightforward and much easier to follow.

As TWEWY is framed around three iterations of the week-long Reapers’ Game, it is broken up into three sections of seven chapters each, plus an additional alternate universe chapter. Neku’s partner in the first week is Shiki Misaki, and his entry fee is his memories. Neku, who greatly prefers solitude, is initially highly opposed to being forced to work with Shiki. However, she eventually gets him to open up, and he convinces her to do the same when her struggle with jealousy begins to take a toll on her. By the end of the week, the two consider each other close friends.

The smug and arrogant Yoshiya “Joshua” Kiryu is Neku’s partner during the second week. As only Shiki was chosen as a winner the previous week, Neku enters a second time—only to find that Shiki has become his entry fee. In addition, while his memories

have been restored, he still has no recollection of his death. Instead of attempting to win the Reapers' Game, Joshua appears to be pursuing his own agenda. As Shiki's fate hangs on their success, Joshua's flippant attitude frustrates Neku. In addition, brief, vague recollections hint that Joshua may know something about his death. Despite the tension between them, Neku is forced to trust his partner. Joshua's motivations and even the nature of his entry in the Reapers' Game are vague, and after he sacrifices himself so that Neku can win the game, Neku is informed that Joshua's entry and consequently his own victory were invalid. He is allowed to enter one more time, with the catch that his previous entry fee will roll over and this game will be his final chance.

When Neku's entry fee for the third and final week ends up being all the other Players, Daisukenojo "Beat" Bito, who had become a Reaper in attempts to save his sister's life, defies his superiors and becomes Neku's partner. Meanwhile, feral and uncontrollable "Taboo Noise" begin attacking Reapers, and the thoughts of Shibuya's entire population start to turn to a single, cryptic statement. With the Underground in shambles, Neku and Beat crash through the farce of the Reapers' Game with reckless abandon, determined to take down the being at the top of the Reapers' chain of command: the Composer.

As the two approach the Composer's lair, they encounter Shiki, who aids them on their way to the final fight with Megumi Kitaniji, the Conductor, whose job it is to run the game the Composer creates. Joshua shows up in the final confrontation and reveals himself to be the Composer, engaged in a game of his own with Kitaniji to decide the fate of Shibuya and its Underground. The Composer had wanted to destroy it, as he believed its people had stagnated and were incapable of change, whereas Kitajini believed that Shibuya still held potential. His plan was to forcibly unite the thoughts of Shibuya, making its citizens more ideal.

Neku, Shiki, Beat, and Joshua all work together to defeat the Conductor, but Neku still doesn't want Shibuya destroyed. Joshua decides to play one final game with him, and while the exact rules are never made clear to anyone but Joshua, the net result is that Shibuya remains intact and Neku, Shiki, Beat, and Rhyme all return to life, meaning that, in some sense, Neku must have been the winner.

The World Ends With You's primary theme is the struggle between the creativity and potential of the individual and the necessity of connecting with the world. Just as the individual has the power to shape the world through creative expression, the joy and pain of the world has the power to shape the individual. This theme echoes not only throughout the plot, but through the design of the entire world.

The power of the individual can be seen throughout various methods of creative expression featured in TWEWY. There are myriad musical themes in the world's terminology. The enemies are called Noise, traveling between planes of reality involving attuning "vibes" to certain "frequencies," and the Reapers' Game is run by the Conductor, Composer, and Producer. In fact, considering the usage of the term "Conductor," the word "Player" takes on a double meaning. In addition to music, street art is featured prominently. In fact, as Mr. Hanekoma (who is a mentor figure for Neku)

is also CAT, the street artist whose work deeply touches and inspires Neku, it is even plot-important.

The power of the world, meanwhile, can be seen most notably in the use of style and fashion. Shibuya has a definite urban vibrancy and personality, and the game is designed with that in mind. The menu's design is that of a cell phone, clothes are referred to as "threads," and obtainable items are called "swag." The importance of the world is perhaps most notable in the "trend" system. There are thirteen brands of pins and threads that can be equipped. In any given part of Shibuya, different brands will be trendier or less trendy. The three trendiest brands get a combat boost relevant to their popularity, while the least trendy brand takes a penalty. It is consequently important to pay attention to what is currently trendy. However, winning battles makes equipped brands trendier. Just as artistic expressions by individuals become part of the world, the trends of the world can be influenced by individuals, emphasizing that the two have a sort of symbiosis.

This theme of the relationship between the individual and the world can also be seen in the character design. Compare Neku and Kitajini as foils. Both characters wear headphones, but while Neku's are always covering his ears, shutting him off, Kitajini's are worn around his neck, broadcasting to the world. Neku succeeds when he learns to open up to the world and let it change him as a person, whereas Kitajini ultimately loses when he is unable to force the ideas of an individual onto the world.

This same theme is even present in gameplay, as the game invites its players to undergo the same journey as Neku. Pins, your primary form of combat, level up and evolve with Pin Points (PP). The catch is that there are three different types of PP that are needed to get all the different pin evolutions. Battle PP, gained from fighting Noise, is the most familiar form of gaining experience. The other two forms of PP, on the other hand, are a reward for *not* playing. Shutdown PP is gained from turning the game off, and Mingle PP is gained from interacting with other Nintendo DS systems. This encourages the player to, like Neku, come out of their shell to explore the world and interact with others.

Ultimately, this theme of the relationship between the individual and the world, worked heavily into the story, characters, game design, and even gameplay, allows for a very emotionally-charged experience that makes it easy to, if not identify with the characters, care about them and their personal stories.

Strongest Element

The story and gameplay of *The World Ends With You* generally complement each other well, but the highlight is likely the use of battle mechanics to emphasize characters' personalities and roles. Shiki, as the first partner, is simple to use, and she introduces players to the mechanics in the same way that she introduces Neku to the world. Beat's tendency to act before thinking often gets him in trouble, so in battle he hits hard but takes a lot of damage when hit. In addition, his combos can turn the tide of a battle most quickly, but can backfire if a player is not paying attention. However, it is Joshua who is most notable. In the story, Neku is quickly put off by Joshua's condescending attitude.

This alone makes him easy for the player to dislike, but in terms of gameplay, he starts as the worst player in the game. As he has a dodge that requires more precise timing than Shiki's block and he cannot jump at all. In addition, while Shiki would do damage while building to a combo, Joshua only does damage at the end of his combos—meaning that he both deals damage more slowly and likely takes it more often. While Joshua ultimately becomes very powerful when his abilities are unlocked (implying that his frustrating mechanics are a result of him holding himself back), he is designed in a way to make the player loathe him as quickly as possible, both in the story and through gameplay.

Unsuccessful Element

Perhaps the greatest flaw in *The World Ends With You* is the inclusion of a countdown timer that appears on the Players' hands to let them know they how much time they have to complete their mission. In a world that attempts to incorporate so many elements of the Reapers' Game into the gameplay, the countdown timer stands out because, from the perspective of the gameplay, it doesn't actually exist. Players (both the in-game characters and the people playing the game) are told in the story that they need to complete their mission in a certain amount of time, then remove that time limit completely once the control is back in a player's hands. In a world as immersive as TWEWY's, it can often yank players right out of the experience when they realize that no, there's no penalty for taking your time.

Highlight

The highlight of *The World Ends With You* for me was the ending. Themes of the individual opening up and forging bonds with the world are highly prominent throughout the entire game, but it is the ending where the themes are strongest. It becomes clear how much Neku has changed in the past few weeks when he calls Kitaniji out on his plan to consolidate Shibuya's thoughts into one, supporting the pain that comes with diversity with the words "If I don't clash, I don't change."

The change in Neku is likely what causes Joshua to ultimately spare Shibuya and restore Neku, Shiki, Beat, and Rhyme to life. A week after the confrontation, Neku reflects on how he was forced to come out of his shell. While he is undeniably thankful for the new perspective he has on life due to opening up, he notably does not attempt to deny the pain. Instead, he accepts the pain that comes with trust and friendship instead of attempting to protect himself by shutting himself off from the world again.

The credits roll, showing Neku meeting up with Beat and Rhyme, as well as seeing Shiki's true appearance for (presumably) the first time. All the while, a heartfelt song plays, its lyrics emphatically stating that "you are not alone." After the credits end, there is a very short scene that is nevertheless the most powerful one in the game: Neku removes his headphones and casts them on the ground behind him, and as the screen fades to white, the words "The World Begins With You" appear on the screen.

This ending provides closure to Neku's story arc, as well as the major theme of the game. Neku has finally stopped shutting himself off from the world, and the closing line is directed at the player as much as Neku. The message is clear: the world both begins and ends with all of us, and is what we make it.

Critical Reception

The World Ends With You met with relatively favorable reception, receiving a score of 88 on Metacritic. It also received scores of 9 out of 10 on both IGN and Gamespot (earning it an "Editor's Choice" on the latter site), with both sites praising its soundtrack, innovation and use of DS controls, and presentation and style. However, Ben "Yahtzee" Croshaw of Zero Punctuation, well-known for his scathing reviews of video games and distaste for JRPGs in particular, disliked the massive amount of story and felt like it was too disconnected to the gameplay. He did, however, appreciate that it did things differently than most JRPGs (and, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, that it released in the PAL regions before North America).

The iOS version released in 2012 met with even better reception, receiving a 91 and 95 on Metacritic for the iPod and iPad versions respectively. Some critics were disappointed by the price tag and separate pricing for both iOS versions, but appreciated the battle controls, with Kotaku going as far to claim the game was better suited for the iPad than it ever was for the DS.

Lessons

- A storyline can be complicated with a climactic payoff, but it should also have easy-to-follow elements that are enjoyable on their own. It is easy to get lost in TWEWY's pileup of puppet masters, but just as easy to follow the personal growth of the main characters.
- Common game mechanics many find frustrating can be made interesting if portrayed right. TWEWY uses invisible walls to create an interesting world instead of frustrated players.
- Players do not actually need to be playing a game to engage in it. The Shutdown and Mingle PP in TWEWY beautifully emphasize the game's primary theme by having players put the game down.
- If some elements of a story are going to tie into a game, *all* elements of the story should tie into the game. The timer served no purpose in the game beyond providing a nonexistent sense of urgency, and the immersion of the game suffered as a result.

Summation

The World Ends With You is a game containing a rich multi-layered narrative, powerful themes, and plenty of incredible stylistic choices, often tying these elements into the gameplay. What's more, it's just fun to play, creating an incredibly immersive and enjoyable experience that players can easily learn from. The World Ends With You is as much a letter of hope and encouragement to the player as it is an entertaining game.