

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Dys4ia
Platform: PC
Genre: Minigame
Release Date: 3/9/2012
Developer: Anna Anthropy
Publisher: Newgrounds
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Anna Anthropy

Overview

Dys4ia is a Flash game that details the struggle of the author during her hormone replacement therapy, from her doubts about how she relates to the world, the pains of the hormone treatment and the hopes whether she will be a normal person ever again. As she states at the beginning of the game, “This is an autobiographical game about my experiences with hormone replacement therapy. My experience isn’t anyone else’s and is not meant to be representative of every trans person”

The game takes place among four levels, named “Gender Bullshit”, “Medical Bullshit”, “Hormonal Bullshit” and “It Gets Better?” Each level comprises several minigames, which last only a few seconds, and they all relate to a single theme. The levels, as indicated by their names, deal with gender issues, medical problems, hormone therapy issues and self-worth problems.

Characters

- **Anna Anthropy** – she is the player avatar. At the beginning of the game, she feels frustrated with herself: she is afraid of being spotted in the women’s restroom, girly clothes don’t fit in, everyone calls her “sir” and feminists don’t accept her as a woman. All this has turned her bitter, and especially angry, to the point she decides to enter hormone replacement therapy, and see if she finally might fit in the world.

Breakdown

The game, as previously noted, comprises four levels, which players tackle in successive order. Each level has several minigames, usually around ten, that players have to complete in order.

The first level receives the name “Gender Bullshit”, and deals with Anna’s problems with her gender identity. The first minigame is perhaps the most telling of all: it starts with a single Tetris-like shape, representing Anna, standing on one side of the screen and a flashing arrow on the other side, inviting players to come to it by moving the shape with the arrow keys. However, there is a brick wall in the middle with a strange hole in it. The obvious instinct is to try to pass through the hole, but no matter how many times players try, it can’t break through the wall. Finally, a message that says “I feel weird about my body” appears on the screen, before moving on to the next minigame. This is a great interaction between narrative and gameplay, since it allows players to feel the frustration of not fitting into the hole (which acts as a metaphor for the accepted standards of society) before moving the narrative forward. In just a few seconds, it establishes the mood for the rest of the experience, and creates the main metaphor of the game with the brick wall, which Ms. Anthropy revisits several times throughout the game.

The rest of the level, however, is a mixed bag of great and not-so-great minigames. Moments like sneaking into the ladies’ restroom or pounding the arrow key trying to fit a girly shirt into Anna’s body are successful because they express the increasing frustration in Anna’s life, while at the same time they allow for player expression. How do you sneak in the restroom: do you take a careful approach, examining the patterns of the women, or do you just make a run for it and hope not to be caught? Moments like these are what immerse the player in a situation as alien as being a trans person, and by far the most successful element of “*Dys4ia*”. Other moments, like walking through the street while the message “Everyone call me ‘Sir’” appears on the screen are less successful, since, while moving the narrative forward, do not offer a chance to players to exercise freedom. For instance, pounding the right arrow key to move faster would let players decide how fast Anna would walk back home and let them imagine how would they act in such a situation.

At the very end of Level One, players move a sun at the bottom of the screen upwards, while the message “Maybe I should finally go on ...” appears on the screen, the last word covered in clouds. When players move the sun up, the clouds go away and the word “hormones” appear on the screen. This is an effective metaphor of how Anna perceives a hormone therapy will solve all her problems.

Level Two receives the name “Medical Bullshit”. It starts with the player trying to find a clinic by using a magnifying glass in a series of identically shaped buildings. This minigame might be the best in the level, since it allows the player to look for a clinic in the way they find most appropriate. Do they look by row, by column, or just by randomly moving the magnifying glass? At the same time, it lets people think, even if they know they will eventually find a clinic, if there might be a chance none of the buildings are the one she is looking for.

Another remarkable moment happens when players are in the clinic itself. Players have to wait in the waiting room while a counter on the screen goes from five to one, eventually moving to the next minigame. Here, players can move throughout the room,

but cannot interact with any element. This moment lets players empathize with the boredom most people associate with waiting rooms, where time slowly passes by and people powerlessly try to kill time. That Ms. Anthropy allowed for such a mundane moment, which in any other game would have been probably been cut, makes “Dys4ia” a more sympathetic game. This is because it allows players to connect with emotions that everybody has felt at one point or another, even if it is just being bored in a waiting room.

The rest of the level, however, is not as successful. Some games, like jumping through hoops or trying to catch flying pills to reduce the blood pressure do not have a good connection between narrative and gameplay, and thus fall, personally, a bit flat. The worst of all, however, is the minigame where the doctor tells Anna that he can’t prescribe her estrogen until she reduces her blood pressure, since there is no interactivity at all. Players have to wait passively until the game switches to the next minigame. This is a turning point in the narrative, since it provides the theme for the rest of the level, and in any other game this would take the form of a cutscene. However, since the rest of the minigames provided at least some degree of interactivity, it is jarring to encounter a minigame where the player has no control. It almost feels as if the game is breaking its own rules, and not for the best. The “Unsuccessful Element” section of this document discusses this minigame in further detail.

Level Three receives the name of “Hormonal Bullshit” and explains the process of Anna’s therapy, from her taking the estrogen to the several changes that happen to her body, like how she finds everything tastier to the increased sensitivity in her nipples. The level ends with the doctor telling Anna she cannot continue her therapy because her blood pressure went back to a high level, while a literally fiery-headed Anna receives the news.

This level has several interesting moments that, although they have limited interactivity, make people empathize with Anna’s situation. The first of them happens when players have to buy the estrogen pills by using Anna’s insurance. The fact that the prices goes from \$100 to \$99 perfectly illustrates the frustration many people feel with health insurance, to the point of asking themselves if it is really worth it to pursue one. Just like the waiting room in Level Two, this is a moment people from all walks of life can identify with.

Even smarter is the minigame where players have to walk home, similar to the one seen in Level One. Here, players move at a regular speed until halfway through the message “These blood pressure pills are really draining my energy”. From then on, players start moving slower and slower, making the task of getting home almost impossible. This is a moment where players feel the same frustration as Anna, they are one and the same, since the plight of Anna, of just reaching home, is now the player’s plight. Also, this level repeats the minigame found at the beginning of level 1, where players have to pass through a wall. Again, no matter how hard they try; players cannot go through. This continues the metaphor that Anna cannot fit in a normal society.

Unfortunately, not all the minigames in this section are winners. This level ends, as previously said, with Anna’s doctor telling her that she cannot continue her therapy because her blood pressure is too high. This minigame repeats the mistake done in the previous level, since there is no interactivity at all. The “Unsuccessful Element” section of this document discusses this minigame in further detail, along with how to improve it.

Finally, Level 4 receives the name “It Gets Better?” In it, Anna continues her treatment by buying estrogen pills online and finally starts feeling more accepted, even if there are some dangling threads, like her blood pressure.

This level feels shorter than the rest, since most of the minigames are straightforward, once again giving limited interactivity, like just answering the phone. The most telling moment, however, happens when players start breaking down the brick wall, in a manner similar to the game “*Arkanoid*” It represents Anna finally trying to fit in into society. However, at the very end, players assume a constantly shifting figure trying to break in the same wall, but before they can try, the game ends. This opens the question open whether Anna will finally fit in or not, leaving the answer to the player.

Strongest Element

The best element about the game narrative is how all the minigames, when taken as a whole, combine in such a way that “*Dys4ia*” feels less like a game and more like an interactive life journal, reaching a level of intimacy rarely seen in videogames. This is especially notable in the minigames that require Anna to break through a wall, how she tries to fit in and failing; how her nipples are more sensitive or everything her girlfriend says makes her cry... Those are emotions that people seldom talk about openly and less so in a videogame. From that point of view, “*Dys4ia*” is a resounding success.

Unsuccessful Element

Unfortunately, not every minigame in “*Dys4ia*” is a success. The minigames where the doctor tells Anna she cannot continue her treatment because of her high blood pressure aim to make the player feel sorry for Anna, or at the very least share her anger to how unfair the situation is. However, they do not have any effect on the player.

The reason for this is that they do not require any involvement from the player. All players have to do is wait for the next game to load and read the text in the screen, turning the game from an interactive to a passive experience.

It might be the case that these minigames had the intention to reflect Anna’s powerlessness when visiting the doctor, taking away the control from the player as a means of reinforcing said emotion. However, with that it also takes away the key element that makes “*Dys4ia*” so engaging.

A way to fix this element would be, for example, to make a minigame where the player tries to calm Anna’s blood pressure by repeatedly pressing a button, only to have the doctor say anyways that her blood pressure is too high. This little change would involve players more into the situation and share with her the frustration of having a high pressure no matter what she does.

Highlight

The signature moment of the game is whenever Anna tries to fit in the wall and she cannot pass through.

Critical Reception

Unfortunately, there are no reviews for “Dys4ia” in either Metacritic or gamerakings.com. However, the game has received its fair share of Internet press.

Ben Kuchera, from Penny Arcade Report, says “*Dys4ia uses the vocabulary of video games in order to share emotions that may not have been as easily described in words. It’s one thing to say you don’t feel comfortable in your own skin. It’s quite another to show someone how that feels with a short game. The moment where you try to fit the character through the slot in the wall is particularly telling. There’s no reason that someone couldn’t fit through there, but it clearly wasn’t designed for you. That scene suggests that the structure isn’t wrong, you are wrong. It’s an elegant way to communicate the idea of being upset at your body, or feeling different and unwelcome... Dys4ia shows that games can be used just as effectively as the written word or film to convey subtle emotions and situations, as long the hand creating the game is skillful.*”

Adam Smith, from the blog Rock, Paper, Shotgun, says “*Dys4ia is personal, revealing, angry, sad, loving and seemingly very honest indeed... As for the content, at times I felt a little uncomfortable because it was like reading the diary of someone I’ve never met*”,

Lessons

- There are many themes that videogames have not yet touched: games about hormone therapy and trans people are not exactly common, mostly because of financial concerns. However, if we want to progress as an art form, we need to deliver more games that touch upon sensitive issues.
- Games can be more powerful than other media: one thing is reading about trans people, and another is being in their shoes. “*Dys4ia*” proves that games have a power for connecting with people that other media can only dream of, because of their power to engage players in a simulation.

Summation

This game deserves an analysis since, in the span of a few minutes, manages to be more intimate and emotional than many games in their entire length, and because it uses the language of videogames to immerse people in a reality very few people are aware of.