

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Super Danganronpa 2: Goodbye Despair
Platform: PSP (Japan only), Playstation Vita, Steam
Genre: Adventure, Visual Novel, Mystery
Release Date: September 2, 2014 (first North American Release)
Developer: Spike Chunsoft
Publisher: Spike Chunsoft
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Kodaka Kazutaka

Overview

In Super Danganronpa 2 (SDR2), fifteen talented freshmen at one of the world's most prestigious high schools find themselves whisked away to an uninhabited island with no remembrance of how they arrived there. A robotic rabbit encourages them to befriend each other and promises that they will be able to return home, but things turn from merely odd to downright dangerous when a robotic bear takes over the island and holds them hostage. If the students ever want to return home, he says, there is only one way - they must murder a fellow student and get away with it. If the killer isn't discovered, then they alone will earn the right to leave the island, while the rest of the students are punished for their failure to find justice. If the killer is ousted, however, they alone will face execution, while the rest of the students resume their new life as prisoners on the island. Who is doing this to them? Why? The students are left to pursue these mysteries while wagering their lives on who they can and cannot trust. After all, it only takes one rotten apple to spoil the bunch.

SDR2 is structured around solving the series of murders that occur while the students search for an escape from the island. It is an adventure game with six chapters, and three

distinct game modes which comprise each. In 'Daily Life', players explore the island and its mysteries, while choosing which characters to befriend, until the relative peace is shattered by the next imminent murder. In 'Deadly Life', players investigate the crimes by collecting evidence. In the 'Class Trials', players must prove who committed the killings through a series of minigames that mix action and logic. During the debates at the core of this mode, the player uses evidence as bullets to literally shoot down or support their classmate's arguments. Other minigames include a puzzle game that involves forming words to solve mysteries; a rhythm game in which players counter hysterical classmates by matching their verbal tempo; a hoverboard minigame in which players reach deductions by choosing which mental pathways to take through their thoughts; a reflex minigame where players cut down opposing viewpoints by swiping the screen; and finally, a logic and narrative puzzle game where players convey theories by reconstructing scattered comic panels. Players advance through SDR2 by clearing these metaphorical minigames and therefore solving cases.

Characters

Hope's Peak Academy Students:

As a high school for 'Ultimate' students who exemplify excellence in their fields, Hope's Peak Academy represents humanity's 'hope' in the form of the next generation. Students who successfully graduate from this prestigious school are said to be set for life. The school itself actively scouts its own students, but for the sake of revenue, also runs a Reserve Course department that is open to all applicants. Covertly, the school doubles as a research facility dedicated to the study of talent.

- **Hajime Hinata** – The player character. He is a focused and no-nonsense student, with a surprisingly intense edge. He has always idolized Hope's Peak Academy and its talented students. Getting accepted into the school was a dream come true for him, and he is the most reluctant of all the students to accept the terrible situation they have found themselves in. Unlike his classmates, he is unable to remember what his Ultimate talent is after arriving at the island, leaving him to be

referred to as the ‘Ultimate ???’ throughout most of the game. This causes him to feel alienated.

- **Chiaki Nanami** – The calm and analytical Ultimate Gamer. She takes the time to think before acting, and frequently aids Hajime throughout the game by helping him reach the correct conclusions.
- **Nagito Komeada** – A student called Ultimate Luck who was accepted to Hope’s Peak Academy because he won a lottery. Because of his underwhelming talent, he considers himself lesser than his classmates. He takes an interest in Hajime early on, and at first appears to be a relatively normal companion. However, he adores the concept of ‘hope’ to the point of obsession, and more than anything, wants to see a hope that can overcome any despair. He believes that his talented classmates are the perfect canvas for his ideals, and he is willing to sacrifice anything, even his own life, in the pursuit of this ‘true hope’. He is one of the most unpredictable and dangerous students on the island, and is the instigator of many of the murders.
- **Other Classmates** – The rest of the students trapped on the island include Akane Owari the fiery Ultimate Gymnast, Fuyuhiko Kuzuryu the Ultimate Yakuza with a soft side, Peko Pekoyama the Ultimate Swordswoman and Fuyuhiko’s childhood friend, Sonia Nevermind the quirky Ultimate Princess, Soda Kazuichi the cowardly and slightly perverted Ultimate Mechanic, Gundham Tanaka the fantastical Ultimate Animal Breeder, Hiyoko Saionji the cute Ultimate Dancer with a mean streak, Mahiru Koizumi the conservative Ultimate Photographer, Ibuki Mioda the upbeat Ultimate Musician, Mikan Tsumiki the shy and nervous Ultimate Nurse, Nekomaru Nidai the spirited Ultimate Coach, Teruteru Hanamura the arrogant Ultimate Cook, and the unnamed Ultimate Impersonator, who masquerades as a character from the first game in the series.

Ultimate Despair:

A mysterious organization dedicated to the destruction of human society. It doesn’t claim to have a meaningful motive – it does everything only for the sake of despair. By using

modern tools such as the internet and the media, and by tapping into the darkest parts of the human psyche, it has managed to drive much of humanity to madness.

- **Monokuma** – A dual-colored robotic bear. At first, he comes across as exaggerated and comedic, but he has a powerful sadistic streak, and delights in despair. He is the one who ordered the students to kill each other, and doesn't tolerate anyone questioning his authority.
- **Junko Enoshima** – The founder of Ultimate Despair. While she was once a highschool girl called the Ultimate Fashionista, she represents a living embodiment of despair. Despair was not only what she lived for, but what she was. She was killed by a previous group of Hope's Peak Academy students in the first game in the series. On the island, however, she still exists in AI form.
- **Izuru Kamukura** – A human experiment engineered by Hope's Peak Academy to represent 'Ultimate Talent'. Once an average student, he volunteered himself to the Academy's research, and became the school's greatest success – the artificial creation of talent. However, his brain and body were irrevocably altered until he became an entirely different person than he once was, even taking on the name of the Academy's founder as a new identity. Now, he has lost the ability to sympathize with regular people and regular life. He murdered thirteen classmates in cold blood at the Academy, an incident which the school covered up due to the classified nature of his existence.
- **Remnants of Despair** – A group of Hope's Peak Academy students who served Junko Enoshima after falling victim to her influence. Vile and sadistic, they continue to carry out the will of Ultimate Despair even after Junko's death.

Future Foundation\World Ender:

An organization that Monokuma calls 'World Ender'. However, the Future Foundation is actually dedicated to fighting back against Ultimate Despair and seeks to rebuild humanity's future.

- **Usami** – A robotic rabbit, and the one who seemingly took the students to the island before it was overtaken by Monokuma. She garishly champions ideals of friendship and goodness, but has plenty of secrets of her own.
- **Makoto Naegi and Classmates** – Before Hajime and his classmates found themselves held hostage by Monokuma, Makoto and his classmates went through a similar ordeal in the first game in the franchise. The six survivors eventually overcame Monokuma's despair by finding their own hope, even if they didn't know what to expect from the world outside after learning the truth about Ultimate Despair. Eventually, they joined up with the Future Foundation.

Breakdown

SDR2 is quite the unusual game. At first glance, it appears shallow, with exaggerated characters and minigame based gameplay. However, by simply playing the game, players discover the narrative depths and mechanical symbolism its aesthetics hide, and are absorbed into a suspenseful world that offers them a wholly unique experience. It's a game that wants you to feel – it wants you to fear for its characters, understand the protagonist's joy and horror, laugh at the absurdity, and feel your heart race during its otherwise simple minigames. SDR2 isn't afraid to break typical game design conventions, and everything it does is in service to the enjoyment of its target audience. It succeeds by spending the time to develop its quirky characters, utilizing thematic contrast to its advantage, filling itself with narrative and mechanical symbolism, and committing to telling its linear story.

At the beginning of the game, players know little about their player character, Hajime, and understand as little about the rest of his classmates as Hajime himself does. However, the characters are designed to be immediately relatable, so as to spur player interest in learning more about them, and to encourage players to fear for their safety once the narrative stakes rise. As suits the mystery genre, the characters may at first appear fairly archetypical, but each one has a unique backstory and hidden aspects of their personality that make them much more than hollow tropes. SDR2's flavorful writing and patient

character development let its cast shine, providing its quirky premise with depth and empathy. It also adds excitement to the game's conflict driven minigames, when the characters' colorful personalities clash against and cooperate with each other to push both the gameplay and the narrative forward. There is an optional relationship system included in the game, as well. While this mechanic doesn't offer narrative agency, it does allow players the chance to choose which characters to befriend. This lets players pursue character arcs that suit their interests, and also fosters investment into these characters, which further raises the narrative suspense. Who will die next? This question becomes much more meaningful as players continually grow attached to Hajime's endangered classmates.

The partially amnesiac Hajime himself has a strong character arc, as well. The player rarely understands more than he does about the mysteries around him at any given time, which keeps players in tune with their character's own emotions, and lets them feel immersed in the world through Hajime's eyes. The themes of his arc – his insecurities about lacking talent and being different from his classmates, and the despair he must ultimately overcome after discovering his true identity as the irrevocably altered Izuru Kamakura – mirror the narrative's overarching armatures of forming your own identity and hope. Other characters, such as the secretive Chiaki Nanami, who is eventually revealed to be an AI that has independently achieved sentience, and Nagito Komaeda, who has been twisted by his own feelings of inferiority and ideals of hope, also support the narrative's themes. However, it is because players care about these characters that the narrative achieves its power.

Additionally, the game doesn't shy away from using contrast to support its story. At times, the narrative seems ridiculously exaggerated, at times slightly perverse, sometimes lighthearted and comedic, at times dark and poignant, and other times, bittersweetly beautiful. Because of its baroque premise, its quirky characters, and its widely varying gameplay modes which adapt seamlessly in feel and pace to the narrative's current tone,

SDR2 uses these shifting moods in service to its themes of the contrast between hope and despair.

The game also skillfully contrasts with the player's expectations to create surprise throughout the narrative. On an overarching level, the game uses players expectations about how games work to its advantage. For instance, the mechanics serve the narrative, instead of the other way around, and the game uses this to enhance the impact of its story. In later chapters, the narrative comments on the video game industry itself, and exactly what video games represent, without blatantly breaking the fourth wall. Instead, it weaves this commentary about freedom, choice, and human power into its existing themes. SDR2 is also highly aware of how players generally expect murder mysteries to unravel, and subverts these expectations throughout the game. One particularly memorable example occurs during a climatic trial segment. While players are trained to believe that murder mysteries are just puzzles to be solved, and that an answer can always be reached, in this instance, the player discovers it is impossible to name a culprit, and a different tactic must be used to 'solve' the case. SDR2 goes so far as to use expectations created by its predecessor to carve out twists, as well. It carefully draws parallels between the two games using initially similar narrative beats and character types, only to contort and incorporate these ideas in unexpected ways. The colorful art style creates another set of expectations all its own, which stand in contrast to SDR2's themes and situations throughout the game, and this mismatch only enhances the impact of its darkest moments.

Perhaps more even important is the game's ability to utilize symbolism. SDR2 drenches both its mechanics and its narrative in metaphor. Its absurd premise of robotic bears and talented students coats a narrative addressing themes such as depression and isolation, the dangers of modern media, and the darkness inherent in humans. For instance, SDR2 uses mostly static images, but videos are used during a certain type of event – character executions. This gratuitous gesture is a metaphor meant to emphasize how players often enjoy seeing violence in games and other media, while at the same time underscoring how morbid that enjoyment actually is, with the surviving characters themselves often

commenting on how they can't look away while a classmate is punished, even though they don't understand why. This same concept of human cruelty is utilized for several twists in the game. During the climax, it is revealed that the amnesiac students – the Remnants of Despair – already surrendered to their own darkness before ever arriving at the island, and their exile was a final attempt by the Future Foundation to help them recover from Ultimate Despair's influence. However, as is demonstrated by subtle shifts in the minigame mechanics and the concept of hope overcoming despair, the characters eventually realize that another part of being human is being able to choose who you are. Other examples of symbolism include characters and events who are mirrored and contrasted from the first game in the franchise. For instance, the character of Nagito Komeada is a mirror character of Makoto Naegi, the player character in the previous game. Nagito himself is used to exemplify the corruption human darkness can have on even the purest of intentions. Throughout the game, these themes are consistently built in service of its powerful conclusion.

Symbolism is also present in the mechanics. The class trials themselves embody a clashing of hope versus despair - in order for the rest of them to survive, the students must condemn one of their classmates to execution. Most of the minigames that make up these trials represent either Hajime's actions or the processes of his own mind, and in doing so, these gameplay styles are directly interweaved into the story. Whether literally shooting down opposing arguments during the debates, or reorganizing comic panels to demonstrate the truth, every type of minigame advances not only the gameplay, but the plot. In this sense, the mechanical tension and the narrative tension of the game align, and further draw the player into the life and death drama of Hajime and his classmates. In contrast to usual game design conventions, SDR2 isn't afraid to covertly alter the rules of the mechanics themselves as the story progresses, in order to sync with the game's narrative beats and encourage the player to feel what the characters are feeling. SDR2's mechanics express the story as effortlessly as a pen forms a novel.

It is worth noting that SDR2's narrative success was possible only because it committed to telling a linear story. While the premise may be far from literary in terms of aesthetics,

its structure utilizes traditional, linear storytelling principles that build its narrative suspense and fully develop its character arcs. Rather than trying to force player agency into a strongly themed and character driven narrative that doesn't need it, SDR2 instead focuses on crafting an impactful, quality experience that will stay with players long after the final credits roll.

Strongest Element

The strongest aspect of SDR2's narrative is its suspense. Once begun, SDR2 doesn't let players escape until they've ridden out all of the game's highs and lows, and reached its satisfying conclusion. This, itself, is due to several reasons. The combination of immediately likable characters with a high stakes premise drives players to continue until they discover the fates of their favorite students. Who will die next? Who will succumb to the despair and commit murder? Which students will make it off the island alive? The character development, along with an interactive relationship system, only increases this sense of attachment. Additionally, instead of forcing narrative agency, the game fully utilizes the fact that its narrative is primarily linear, and instead focuses on aligning the tensions of the story and gameplay in such a way that the player is pulled in with a racing heart and sweaty palms, while the mechanical challenge increases alongside the narrative intensity. The metaphorical mechanics also serve this, acting as a vehicle to further absorb the player into the world, its characters, and the intensity of their ordeals.

Unsuccessful Element

While SDR2 generally utilizes thematic contrast effectively, there are scenes in which the humor undermines the tension. This is especially prominent in the last couple of chapters, in which gags such as flatulence jokes and innuendos distract from the sense of dread and work against the emotional impact the game is trying to build. They might also sabotage a player's immersion, as increased suspension of disbelief is required to believe that people would act the way some characters do during the narrative's most intense situations. While the humor does often provide characterization and comedic relief, and

while it's fortunate that a game with SDR2's exaggerated premise doesn't take itself too seriously, it feels as though the humor should have been concentrated in the earlier chapters, or utilized during periods of rest, rather than at the peaks of the game's suspense.

Highlight

While full of memorable moments, a highlight that exemplifies everything the game does well is the gameplay at the end of the final trial. The truth about Hajime's identity is revealed – a huge narrative climax – and immediately during the next minigame, the game breaks its own mechanics, as the health bar fluctuates up and down before Hajime begins to take damage during the dialogue, itself. Instead of allowing players a chance to retry, as is typical when the health bar is drained, the game instead warps to another interactive minigame and a completely different story scene that takes place inside the protagonist's head. This time, the player's only evidence is represented as 'null'. The confusion these broken mechanics present alongside the suddenly baroque narrative coincide in harmony to draw players into what's happening inside Hajime's own mind – it allows them to understand firsthand the chaos and hopelessness all the sudden narrative revelations are inflicting on him and on his sanity, and allows players to feel their character's inner world crumbling. However, players are able to use the story itself to solve these broken mechanics – the answers lie in the dialogue and in the game's own narrative themes, and once players do overcome the oddities, the mechanics once again change. This time, the player has nearly infinite power in the next couple of minigames, and is seemingly able to break the mechanical rules on their own as a way of experiencing Hajime's personal revelations and feelings of freedom and triumph. This works perfectly with the game's themes of choosing hope over despair, and allows players to experience that theme in a way that wouldn't be possible in other mediums, or even in more conventional games that shy away from altering their own mechanics in service to the story. This segment perfectly demonstrates the power of metaphorical mechanics, as well what games can do with well developed characters.

Critical Reception

While a somewhat niche game, SDR2 has received critical acclaim. Upon its original release in Japan, the video game news magazine Famitsu rated it 37/40, and readers voted SDR2 as the best game of 2012.¹ In 2013, it also went on to claim an Award of Excellence at the Japan Game Awards.²

When it reached western audiences in 2014, reviewers were similarly enamored, if sometimes slightly bewildered. Game Critics, which gave SDR2 a 90/100 score, praised the narrative, saying that “the writers have outdone themselves”, and that “the new [characters] are all distinct and memorable”.³ The Kotaku Review mentioned that while the structure was “pretty rigid and linear,” adding non-linear progression would have “really screwed with the pacing”, and also awarded the game a score of 90/100.⁴ The Vita Lounge, which awarded SDR2 with a perfect score of 5/5, enjoyed that the “the journey [the designers] laid out was not at all what I expected (just when you think you know what’s going on – left turn!)”.⁵ Game Revolution was slightly more critical in terms of the mechanics, offering the game a 4/5, but called SDR2 “crazy in all the right ways”.⁶ GameSpot was similarly critical with some of the minigames, giving the game an 8/10, but praised the game for a “strong narrative that constantly turns your expectations on their heads” and its “fantastic exploration of argumentative metaphors through gameplay.” It closed its review by stating that “Danganronpa 2 is a simultaneously terrifying, uplifting, painful, thoughtful, funny, and heartbreaking delight. Anyone who cherishes engaging stories, unique gameplay experiences, and great characterization would do well to invest themselves in this series”.⁷ US Gamer awarded the game a 4.5/5, saying that “Danganronpa 2’s mysteries are astoundingly complex and well-written”, and that it contains “some of the best writing you’ll ever see in a video game”.⁸

Player reception has also been positive. Since SDR2’s release on Steam in April 2016, the game has retained a combined player rating of ‘Overwhelmingly Positive’ on the platform.⁹

Lessons

- **Character development leads to player investment:** While customization and blank slate characters are often accepted as the ‘ideal’ method of achieving player attachment, SDR2 takes a different route. Instead, it creates characters that are quirky and immediately likable, but that offer surprising depth as the story advances. In this sense, the game encourages players to empathize with its characters in the way they would the characters of a novel. It also challenges players to see the world through the eyes of a flawed, fully developed main character instead of a ‘personalized’ fantasy hero developed mostly through sliders and stats. With its high stakes story, SDR2 is all the better for it, as many other games would be as well.
- **Games can effectively utilize thematic contrast:** SDR2 can switch between ridiculous and comedic to serious and horrifying in a moment. This type of narrative contrast generally comes across as forced in other types of media, but because gameplay itself can vary to fit these ranging narrative moods, and because most players enter a game with differing expectations than they would when beginning a book or a movie, games can actually utilize this contrast effectively. Between its absurd but powerful narrative, and its diverse minigames, SDR2 embraces contrast to better influence the way it wants players to feel.
- **Games can express symbolism in both narrative and gameplay:** SDR2 is highly metaphorical in terms of both its story and its gameplay. Narratively, themes about depression, humanity’s inherent darkness, and the dangers of modern media are wrapped up in an outwardly shallow aesthetic. Mechanically, the gameplay itself changes depending upon the beats of the story, and the mechanics metaphorically represent the character’s actions and states of mind. Many games, such as Dys4ia and Papers, Please have been built around mechanic as metaphor, but SDR2 proves that a game can also use these techniques effectively by integrating them into a fuller and more diverse experience.

- **Powerful game narratives do not require player agency:** Player agency is sometimes regarded as the hallmark of game storytelling. However, SDR2 proves that a game narrative doesn't have to be interactive in order to engage players. While linear, SDR2 tells an immersive story by utilizing differing techniques, such as traditional character development, narrative-driven tension, and mechanical metaphor. Rather than offering players narrative agency, it offers a powerful, carefully crafted experience.

Summation

All in all, SDR2 is worth examining because what appears to be a shallow game on the surface hides hidden narrative depths that many different types of games could benefit from. SDR2 is fearless – it knows exactly what it wants to be, and doesn't worry about adhering to supposed best practices. Because of this, it is a game which different players tend to love or hate, with little opinion in between, and while not all of its risks pay off, its conviction allows it to delight its chosen target audience. SDR2 also proves that linear stories can be told effectively in games, by utilizing character development and mechanical metaphor to draw players into its world instead of forcing player agency. Its willingness to focus on its characters, play with contrasting themes and moods, utilize symbolism, and alter its own mechanics mid-game to better express the developing story make other games seem timid by comparison.

Citations

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⁴ Hamilton, Kirk, and Jason Schreier. "Danganronpa 2: Goodbye Despair: The Kotaku Review." *Kotaku*. Gawker Media. 02 Sept. 14. Web. 15 Nov. 2016.

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⁸ Mackey, Bob. "Danganronpa 2: Goodbye Despair Vita Review: Last Resort." *US Gamer*. Gamer Network, 13 Sept. 14. Web. 15 Nov. 2016.

⁹ "Danganronpa 2: Goodbye Despair." *Steam*. Valve Corporation, Apr. 2016. Web. 15 Nov. 2016.