

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Emily Is Away

Platform: Windows, Mac OS X, Linux

Genre: Visual Novel, Interactive Text Game

Release Date: November 20, 2015

Developer: Kyle Seeley

Publisher: N/A

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Kyle Seeley

Overview

Emily Is Away, is a visual novel about watching a relationship slowly die right before your eyes. The game features an ongoing conversation between the protagonist (the player character) and their on and off again friend, Emily. The game's narrative follows the player character and Emily as they progress from their senior year of high school (2002) and through their final year of college (2006). Their relationship is communicated only through the chat window of an early 2000's era instant messenger client. As the two main characters age, so do their profiles which make reference to cultural touchstones in each of the game's five playable years. The main conflict of the story comes through the tension underlying the on and off again nature of the two character's feelings towards each other. Each encounter between the Emily and the player start under the pretense of "catching up" and often lead to a delicate dance around their current friends, old times fondly remembered, and present romantic partners that generate jealousy. Over the course of the three years it slowly becomes clear that although these two might have once been a fit for one another, they have missed their opportunity.

Characters

- **Protagonist** – A senior in high school, and the player character. They are a somewhat socially awkward student, who longs for friendship and connection throughout a tumultuous time of change and transition in their life. Little is known about the character except that they are an average student, caught between romantic relationships, nostalgic for previous years, and prone to avoiding parties

(even when tempted by their best friend and crush). We never see them, but their personality comes through their responses to Emily's messages. Their central conflict is that while they often harbor feelings for Emily, they are extremely hesitant to open up and confront that fact, often leading to feelings of regret and tension later on. In conversation they often hide behind corny jokes and boring small talk initially then later become increasingly bold behind the faux-security of their username. Although their conversations with Emily are few and far between, it is clear that the potential of what they could have had continues to haunt them throughout their time away at college.

- **Emily** – The player's high school friend and college pen pal. Emily is a talented and outgoing student whose company gives energy to the player. She is often emotionally supportive and encouraging of the player, although she does have an insecure side that surfaces later in college. Emily does eventually confide in the player that her college relationship is going poorly, which is difficult for the player to deal with because of their crush on Emily. For much of the game Emily is a source of characterization and worldbuilding through her angsty profile descriptions, alternative song quotes (Coldplay, Snow Patrol, etc.), and later becomes an active force on the player by asking them for their honest feelings, relationship advice, and possibly even coming to visit.
- **Brad** – Another high school senior from the player's hometown school. Brad isn't described in detail, but initially Emily complains to the player that Brad is constantly messaging her online. Depending on the player's actions Emily may hook up with Brad at an end-of-high school party and start dating him throughout the beginning of college. Emily later complains about their possibly abusive relationship to the player and breaks up with him, only to later reconnect with Brad towards the end of college. Brad's relationship with Emily represents what the player would have had with Emily "if only" they had kissed Emily at the party. Brad's behavior tends towards abuse and neglect, something that is mirrored in some of the player's more manipulative dialogue options.
- **Travis** – The senior who threw the end-of-year party and potential love romantic partner of Emily. If the player does not attend the party, Emily will end up dating Travis, only to later break up with him. Like Brad, she will start dating Travis again at the end of college if she dated him at the beginning of college. Travis's relationship with Emily represents what the player could have had "if only" they had gone to the party.
- **Emma** – A college friend and potential romantic partner of the player character. Emma's personality is never described except briefly by the player as "nice" and "funny." The player can choose to cancel plans with Emma to have Emily visit their college for the weekend, which will cause Emma to fall out of the player's life. A fact that the player later brings up and regrets in discussion with Emily towards the final moments of their relationship.

Breakdown

(The synopsis is a summary and critique of the game's story and characters, giving general impressions, and overall analysis thereof. This is the place to go in-depth on

what the story is, how it functions, what elements work, what ones don't, and so on. This is the meat of the report. Students should try to identify, if possible, narrative structures and turning points, and explicate the interaction between narrative & gameplay.)

It is rather tricky to exactly pin down exactly what genre *Emily Is Away* belongs to. It has the style and trappings of interactive text games, visual novels, high school teen dramas, and simulators. Perhaps the game is best described as a "slice of life" game because the narrative unfolds in an extremely casual manner, over the course of many years, and with meandering conversations. The discussions that Emily and the player have often end in a meaningful and pointed way, but zig and zag across a broad array of pleasantries, cultural references, and vague suggestions of attraction. Although the player has the ability to choose how they respond in these conversations, they don't truly have much effect on the way the events of their lives unfold. Dialogue is used to characterize first, and impact the (mostly linear) story second.

Although the game's dialogue is fairly meandering, it does lay over a coherent narrative structure and the main characters' character arcs do grow around their conversations and relationship. The player starts out in 2002, as a high school senior, just about to graduate. In this first conversation with Emily, the two talk about school, how excited they are to leave for college, and Emily tries to coax the player into agreeing to come to an end-of-the year party with her. Even if the player does agree to attend the party and be social, the entire conversation is mixed with flavors of romantic tension and double meanings as the two hide their interest in one another.

The next time the two speak is a year into college, 2003. During this chat, the player reaches out to Emily, testing the waters and trying to reconnect. In the beginning of their conversation, the two bond over some fond memories and high school drama, in which the player has the ability to mock a student (either Brad or Travis) that was hitting on Emily the night of the party. She informs the player that she's started dating that student. Depending on how vicious the player was in his description of the other character, they may cause Emily to retreat a little bit. Regardless, the player ends up shifting the conversation away from the subject and towards the topic of college. They make small talk, and say goodbye.

One year later, in 2004, the player reaches out to Emily and asks how she has been doing and how her relationship with either Brad or Travis is. She mentions that the two of them broke up, and this presents the player with the first majorly impactful choice of the game. The player is able to console Emily, then she inquires as to why the player didn't come to the party with her back in high school or if the player did come, why didn't they kiss her. This causes both of the characters to speculate on what their relationship could have been together, which leads Emily to ask if she can come visit the player at school. This is a character defining moment for the player because they can say no to Emily, allow her to visit him with the agreement that they will have boundaries, and allow her to come without boundaries. If they do agree to see each other, the player must cancel weekend plans they had with Emma, their present college crush.

What is particularly interesting about how the game's narrative design is structured is that at this point it skips ahead another year, to 2005, and we don't get to experience their weekend together. This time, however, Emily is the one that messages

the player. She asks about their weekend together. If they didn't agree on boundaries before hand it turns out that the two hooked up, and Emily mentions that she feels uncomfortable because she was so vulnerable during that time. If the two had agreed to boundaries, Emily asks the player why they didn't try to start a relationship with her while she visited. Either way, at this point, the game introduces what will become its major theme: the inevitable decay of relationships. Regardless of how the player handled the weekend visit, and regardless of how the player responds to Emily's concerns, the two are left in awkward and uncomfortable silence. The two then say their terse goodbyes, each needing some space. A strange and surreal climax to a relationship that ebbed and flowed.

Although it doesn't stop there. As if to put the final nail in the coffin, the player makes one last effort to reach out to Emily. It is 2006, the final year of college, four years after they both talked of parties, teen drama, and college stars in their eyes. From the beginning of their conversation it is clear that the two have a great distance between them. They are not unfriendly to each other, but their words lack meaning. Emily says she started her relationship back up with Brad or Travis, and she asks about Emma. The player says they haven't seen her in a long time, and Emily it is suggested that Emily is responsible if she had chosen to visit two years earlier. The last piece of baggage between them has thus been addressed and the conversation has nowhere else to go. It is as the two wrap up some empty small talk that we see what is perhaps the most poignant moment of the entire game. Every response the player makes will start as a heartfelt expression of remorse, emotion, love, or questioning, but will immediately be erased and replaced with some nicety, well-wishes, or post-college speculation. It's clear that the player may still harbor feelings for Emily, even though she does not reciprocate them, and the player knows this. They fully acknowledge this, self-censor their messages, and quickly log off first with a short, sad goodbye.

Strongest Element

The strongest element of *Emily Is Away* must be its visual and audio design. The game is an interactive text game, but it is built into the early 2000's trappings of an AOL instant messenger chat client. Complete with a fake Windows XP operating system and boot-up sounds, the presentation of the narrative through this medium adds a lot of weight to the themes at hand. It makes it a fun experience to revisit that early 2000's chat culture aesthetic, while also subtly reminding us through cheesy profile pictures, usernames, and profile descriptions that used to fill the incredibly meaningful, tumultuous, and emotional world of teens on the cusp of adulthood. The game's narrative would be able to stand on its own accord, but when placed in this (dare I say nostalgic) atmosphere, it takes on a whole new sense of realism.

Unsuccessful Element

Although *Emily Is Away* features a dynamic and surprisingly honest relationship between Emily and the player, the role of the other minor characters leaves much to be desired. Brad, Travis, and Emma add some to the story as flavor and plot devices that push the protagonist in particular directions at times, but ultimately they are extremely superficial.

Brad and Travis exist as little more than projections of the player's regrets and insecurities, and Emma is only used as the "nice girl" who the player inevitably leaves behind in the pursuit of Emily, his "one." These side characters have profiles in the messenger client, which is a nice touch, but it would be nice to see them play a slightly more active role in the narrative, or at the very least have more nuanced characterization to play off of.

Highlight

The absolute pinnacle of *Emily Is Away* takes place in the final moments of the player and Emily's dying relationship. By this point the two have grown increasingly distant with no hope for rekindling the spark that once lived between them, but this doesn't stop the player character from typing out the most brutal honest and revealing messages of the entire game, only to immediately delete and replace them with something mundane. Two powerful examples are when the player types "You're my best friend" then quickly changes it to "You're one of my best friends" and when they type "Will we ever be the way we were?" and replace it with "Watch any good movies lately?" In the space of barely a couple minute the player pours their heart out and immediately covers it up, time and time again, and it is brutal to watch. This sequence brings their entire relationship full circle from small talk, to flirting, to missed connection, and back to small talk. Except this time, the small talk does not bring the promise of the future, but instead lurks in the past.

Critical Reception

Emily Is Away has been received with warm critical praise, but isn't a commonly scored game. Its reviews tend to dwell on the innovation of the game's narrative design and how successfully it manages to tap into the nostalgia of a very unique era in internet-based communication. [Brendan Caldwell from Rock Paper Shotgun](#) reviewed the game alongside a number of other small free PC games, but spoke highly of the game's ability to make him invested in what felt like "real MSN cyberdrama from... teens." Brendan attributes much of the narrative success to the use of passive aggressive statements, reading too much into meanings, and subtle prodding questions in being able to build that teen gossip atmosphere. [Philip Aldous of Indie Haven](#) speaks to many people's experiences with the game by saying that "It wasn't fun, but I didn't dislike it. [I had] an emotional response to the content of the game, and it was more powerful than any I've ever felt from a game before." Like many people, the combination of early 2000's instant messenger nostalgia with the feeling of truly being main character loving and losing this girl what very powerful for Philip. Both reviewers cited the realistic teen dialogue and brutally honest depiction of what it means to grow so close to someone under the pseudo-anonymous context of the internet. The ability to be so incredibly honest and yet distant is an experience that was so common on platforms like AOL and MSN messenger, an experience that has never been so successfully portrayed in art.

Lessons

- *Forcing the player to make bad choices can be revealing.* Through the game, the player inevitably makes bad decisions, some of which are completely unavoidable. This not only subverts the common game writing tropes of “good, bad, and neutral” dialogue options, but it also replicates the fallible nature of vulnerable people chatting.
- *If you are going to use side characters as plot devices, make them as real as your main characters.* Emily and the player have such life to their characterization, that when put alongside the cardboard presentation of Brad, Travis, and Emma, they completely clash. Avoiding stereotypes in your characters not only a good thing on a surface level, it will force you to be a better writer.
- *Breaking the player’s control over time can be powerful.* Games are an interesting medium because they usually give the player agency over time and space. You are free to go where you want, whenever you want. But as is the case with *Emily Is Away*, making the player make incredibly difficult choices (like inviting Emily to visit you) and then cutting to a year later is a bold move that forces the player to immediately experience the long term effects of their decision, something that wouldn’t happen if we were allowed to play out the entire scenario. It emphasized that what matters is how every decision leads to an end.

Summation

Emily Is Away is a strange yet beautiful little game that builds on the tradition of visual novels and text games in some innovated ways. It is the first game to capture the nostalgia and experience of early online chat clients, and does so brilliantly. By pairing a (now) long lost form of communication with the story of two young people watching the death of their relationship and dwelling on a nostalgic past, the developer sets up the player for an unforgettable experience, in the best and worst ways.