

Game Narrative Review

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Month/Year you submitted this review: March 2017

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Game Title: *That Dragon, Cancer*

Platform: Windows, OS X, Ouya

Genre: Point-and-click, visual novel

Release Date: 12 January 2016

Developer: Numinous Games

Publisher: Numinous Games

Game Writer: Amy Green

Overview

That Dragon, Cancer is the autobiographical story the Green family as their infant son Joel battles cancer. Through the course of a series of vignettes, the player walks through critical moments in Joel's treatment, moments of weakness shared by his parents Amy and Ryan, and the strength they hold onto to weather the most tragic event of their lives.

Characters

- Joel Green – Joel is the central figure of the game, Amy and Ryan's infant son diagnosed with terminal cancer. Over the course of the game, players care for Joel as he struggles for survival.
- Amy Green – Joel's mother, as well as the writer for *That Dragon, Cancer*. She is a cautiously optimistic woman who relies on her religious faith to guide her through the emotional turmoil of her son's diagnosis and treatment. She is privately critical of her husband Ryan, who she feels is too often caught up in his own despair. She is often a figure of comfort and joy for Joel, even at great emotional cost.
- Ryan Green – Joel's father, a grief-stricken and deeply contemplative man, as well as the narrator and lead designer for *That Dragon, Cancer*. While Ryan is also deeply religious, he is much less assured by his faith compared to his wife, Amy. He struggles with constant overwhelming feelings of hopelessness and isolation. Ryan is a passionate and loving father to Joel.

Breakdown

That Dragon, Cancer chronicles the Green family's lives beginning shortly after Joel is born. The player meets Joel first, helping him feed bread to ducks in a pond and playing in a park. Ryan narrates softly, doting on his son. This illustrates the normal life that the Greens lived before Joel's diagnosis—the life that they deserved. While most of the Greens' story is anguish, this scene is calm, serene. The only scene to repeat a moment like this one is a scene in Heaven itself. Before the story really begins, the player is introduced to the Greens as people, not yet as people in crisis. This kind of introduction underscores the humility and candid vulnerability that hallmark the characters in *That Dragon, Cancer*. It also reminds the player that this is not an exceptional story about exceptional people, but about *unexceptional* people; people whose stories are usually left untold.

After Joel is diagnosed, this idyllic scene inevitably slips away. Most of the story is told in hospital settings, surreal nightmarish landscapes, or a blend of the two. These surreal images are wild and strange next to the clinical real world that the family feels so trapped in, giving insight into the Greens' emotional state, which perpetually fluctuates between hope, sorrow, rage, listlessness, and bitter self-loathing, but still constantly overflowing with love and affection. Joel floats on a string of balloons, one by one being popped and severed by giant erratic black tumors. Joel rides animals made of constellations of stars while he giggles and laughs against a beautiful night sky. While these images are not always easy for the audience to empathize with or even understand sometimes, it reminds the player of the highly personal nature of the content. The Greens

did not seek to tell anyone's story but their own. Not all pain can be shared. While *That Dragon, Cancer* might struggle to find ways to bridge this gap, some pain will be unique to their experience. Some of their relief will be just as unique. These risks pay off for the story because they are honest to the source without hesitation or apology.

Many of these surreal images reinforce the strength that Amy and Ryan draw from their religion. While much of Amy and Ryan's real life conversations and monologues discuss their faith and how they come to terms with Joel's cancer, it has much more emotional impact when player is braving figurative storms and floods made manifest through the family's eyes. Floods are particularly common in *That Dragon, Cancer*, illustrating the religious double-meaning that parallels the Greens' tragedy: incredible chaos and destruction that eventually yields cleansing, rejuvenation, and a new start. For Amy and Ryan Green, that is exactly what their religion offers them: a way to recover from loss.

While Amy and Ryan find their own ways to cope, they still put all their effort into making Joel's life a celebration, as full of joy and hope as two parents could. This juxtaposition between childlike wonder and impending death brings the audience closer to empathizing with their loss. The paradox is inherent in the premise of having a game about losing a child in the first place, and manifests throughout the experience. In a particularly sardonic montage scene, Amy drives Joel around a fictional racetrack in the ICU, illustrating the kind of game that a mother and son would play made surreal. As Amy and Joel, the player chases brightly colored power-ups, they crash their way through oversized balloons, and they are always in first place. After several laps, the player "wins the race," and reveals that the power-ups they had been collecting the whole time were a litany of varied chemotherapy treatments and other medical procedures. The player helps complete the illusion of security and exuberance that Amy and Ryan sheltered Joel with, seamlessly blending narrative and gameplay.

That Dragon, Cancer is not just a story about a dying child. It is one family's personal story that demonstrates what it is like to learn to live beyond grief. The Greens address their loss candidly and put it on full display, in part to celebrate their son's life but in a much greater sense as a service to the innumerable other families that are fighting their own dragons without the benefit of a public platform or a massively successful crowdfunding campaign. *That Dragon, Cancer* is a story that guides and reassures its players that we are not defined by our weakest moments, a place where too few games dare to go.

Strongest Element

That Dragon, Cancer excels at blending literal and figurative imagery to tell an autobiographical story with emotional integrity. Borrowing from the surreal gives players a unique insight into the emotions underlying each scene. This is encapsulated in the scene “I’m Sorry, Guys, It’s Not Good,” when Joel’s oncologist is telling the family that their child’s cancer is terminal. While the characters in the scene are perfectly still and polite, listening to characters’ thoughts reveals the thoughts and emotions they are suppressing. These thoughts and emotions become surreal in the scene as the room begins to flood, but the characters remain outwardly calm. The Greens’ ability to invite an audience into their grief while still being true to their story makes *That Dragon, Cancer* a distinct narrative experience like reading a diary.

Unsuccessful Element

Where *That Dragon, Cancer* excels at delivering an impactful and devastating story, it lacks synergy with gameplay elements and ludonarrative harmony. There are not a lot of narrative elements that are expressed and developed through player actions. Instead, the player is usually just observing the events happening on screen and the audio-visual components without needing to actively play. Ryan Green has publicly denounced “Let’s Play” videos of this game as a major contributing factor for the game’s lack of commercial success.¹ More active ludonarrative elements would have helped make the experience feel more like the player’s contributions had meaning.

Given the unique premise of the game, this does raise some challenging questions. Namely, can autobiographical games engage players through firsthand play beyond audio-visual spectacle without sacrificing the story’s integrity? If they can, should they? *That Dragon, Cancer* is an exploration into how ambitious narrative designers might learn to evolve personal vignettes through interactive media, illustrating as much in its shortcomings as it does in its success.

Highlight

The Greens explore the depth of their family’s struggle both as characters and developers, but *That Dragon, Cancer* features an overwhelming number of smaller stories volunteered by their Kickstarter community. Dozens of people who donated to the production contributed their own stories about cancer and loss through eulogy cards or short non-fiction stories displayed throughout different vignettes. One episode, “Waking Up,” features dozens of these eulogies and survivor stories covering every surface of the ICU and hanging from the ceiling. The image is breath-taking. Many people contributed artwork by cancer victims and survivors, hospitalized children, and many others that endured similar struggles as Joel and the Green family, transcending age, language, and religion. The way the Greens embraced the broader audience as meaningful content contributors extends the narrative beyond just this one family, showing how their story is just one unique tragedy among countless others.

Critical Reception

The radical premise of the narrative design in *That Dragon, Cancer* makes it uniquely challenging for a conventional game review. Most critics praised the raw emotional power and vulnerability that the game balances throughout its story as its greatest strength. Even among professional reviewers, *That Dragon, Cancer* compelled many people to publicly reflect on their own relationships with disease, death, and loss.

Jenn Frank at Kotaku praised the game for taking players into previously uncharted emotional territory for the medium. She writes, “I don’t think I’ve ever played a videogame that takes place in an ICU before... [and] for a few years and right up until six months ago, I spent a lot of meaningful time in the ICU.” For Frank, the story’s unflinching portrayal of the Greens’ suffering and survival pushes the audience to empathy. More broadly she argues that the game challenges what it means to feel heroic in the face of terminal, degenerative disease.

Morgan Davies with GameSpew offered *That Dragon, Cancer* a perfect 10/10 score, citing the exceptional bravery and risks that the game took. While he reminds his readers that this is a unique gaming experience that might not attract all audiences, Davies also says “it’s practically impossible to compare to any other gaming experience that’s come before it, because it expands the boundaries of what peoples’ idea of video games are...” Davies describes the narrative as “heartbreaking” and “without remorse” as players witness the Green family’s grief laid bare and share in it.

Lessons

Lesson 1: Video games are capable of the emotional depth necessary to tell autobiographical personal narratives. Games are masters of fantasy, but there are many more stories that we should tell. The medium is ready to mature and invite new audiences to have new untold experiences.

Lesson 2: Gaming communities are ready to be emotional collaborators. A large part of the emotional impact of *That Dragon, Cancer* was crowdsourced from their community who felt passionate about sharing their story with the Greens and with the rest of the world. As we strive to develop more personal narratives in games, storytellers must remember that our audience have their own stories that we must connect with, embrace, and include in our mission as much as our own story. Allowing a space for the communitarian nature of stories is what will make games distinctive as narrative platforms.

Summation

That Dragon, Cancer is a landmark, not only to emotional storytelling, but to the most intimate of human tragedies. This game is a testament to the talent and bravery of a family and their close friends. It is a testament to the three thousand crowd-funders that believed in this story and contributed their own effort, their own money, their own stories, to make this game come to life. *This Dragon, Cancer* will stand as a monument in the history of interactive storytelling as one of the first times that people gave up their most raw moments to the world, and the world listened.

References

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- [2] <http://kotaku.com/cancer-the-video-game-471333034>
- [3] <http://www.gamespew.com/2016/02/dragon-cancer-review/>