

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Florence

Platform: Mobile (iOS/Android)

Genre: Puzzle/Interactive Novel

Release Date: February 14, 2018

Developer: Mountains

Publisher: Annapurna Interactive

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Ken Wong

Overview

A young woman named Florence Yeoh is tired of her monotonous life of commuting to work at a job she doesn't care about and coming home to a TV and store bought meals. Everything changes when, one day on her commute, her phone dies and the sounds of a cello lead her to a young man named Krish. The game follows Florence's blossoming relationship with Krish and all the excitement it offers, its decline into monotony, and her life after Krish, moving forward while still holding onto pieces of him.

Characters

- **Florence** — The player character; a 25-year-old accountant living in Melbourne, Australia. When she was a young girl, she demonstrated a love for and skill at art and painting, but her mother stressed the importance of focusing on math instead. As Florence grows up, the friends she had begin to drift away until she's an adult, all by herself, working an accounting job she doesn't enjoy. One day on her commute, she passes by a cellist in the park and crashes her bike, distracted by seeing him. He helps her off the ground. The two begin to date, and Florence is shown to be very affectionate with Krish. She also supports him growing as an artist, as she physically pushes him to go audition at a conservatory for which he has a flier in his room. Eventually, things fall apart for them as the two begin to fight over small things, which affects Florence greatly. She's in a gloom for a while in the aftermath, and lifts herself out of it by taking up painting again using the paints Krish bought her. She eventually grows enough of a following to leave behind her career in accounting and take on painting full time, culminating in a

- gallery opening. By this point, she's also shown to have moved on from Krish in a healthy manner, taking a photo of them together and holding it close.
- **Krish** — A young man who Florence first encounters playing the cello in a park. His relationship with her later begins when Florence crashes her bike one day and he helps her up. They begin dating and soon move in together. Krish is shown to be an affectionate boyfriend, as he seems to genuinely be happy when he's with Florence and as they do new things around Melbourne. He also supports Florence's art hobby, buying her a new set of paints. After living with her for a while, the two fall out of love. Krish's music takes on a new feel as it loses the lightness and warmth it used to have, and becomes sombre, dragged down by the stress of the music conservatory. Krish and Florence begin to have fights over minor things, and he's shown to be very affected by them, until the two break up and he moves out, not seen again in the game.
 - **Florence's Mom** — Most of Florence's mother's interactions with her daughter are over phone calls peppered throughout the game. She is physically present in one sequence in her early life where she makes Florence practice math. She's shown to be an overly concerned parent, as most of her phone calls see her nagging Florence over different responsibilities and asking her countless questions about her well being (to which Florence largely replies with terse answers). However, she's shown to be very caring towards Florence, as after Florence's breakup with Krish, she listens to her daughter patiently as Florence cries and talks things through. She's later shown to be very excited and proud at her daughter's later gallery exhibition.

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.)

The early game of *Florence* focuses on the title character's life up till the events of the game. The early game serves to humanize Florence, explaining her background and making her relatable to the player. One sequence sees the player as a young Florence, creating their own art piece of a boat and a butterfly, symbols which resurface later in the story with the same design. While callbacks like that can be effective in making a player feel like they're in the story, this one in particular feels a bit insignificant and is entirely up to the player's own investment into creating the initial art piece— if the player rushes past it, not spending a lot of thought in how they want to create the art, the emotional impact of seeing it later is minimal.

The game fast forwards and sees Florence drift away from friends until she's alone at 25 and in a monotonous routine. The mechanics here, for interactions such as brushing her teeth or liking posts on social media, effectively communicate that feeling to the player,

although it can be argued that they lack any depth or consequence to the story. The game more or less plays out the same as it always will, as it just requires the player's consent and basic cooperation to keep moving.

This routine is broken up when Florence's phone dies on her commute to work, and she takes out her headphones and follows the sound of music down a street. In a strange break from the rest of the game, there's a sequence of magical realism as Florence begins to fly towards the source of music as the player taps on music notes that appear on the screen. Though it doesn't necessarily fit in with the rest of the game, this sequence feels necessary to convey how unreal the onset of love can feel in hindsight.

Florence later is biking when she spots Krish and crashes her bike, only for him to help her up. The mechanic here is centered around focusing Florence's vision, which, while related to what's happening in the narrative, feels more like an annoyance than an effective narrative element.

The main part of the game centers around Florence and Krish's dates and life together. This is, in many ways, the strongest part of the game. The game's strongest mechanic is here, the use of piecing together puzzles in the shape of dialogue bubbles as a metaphor for putting together a conversation. In the game, the dialogue puzzles become easier to put together the longer that Krish and Florence talk, showing their conversation becoming easier. This section also features smaller interactions made enjoyable by their on-screen outcome, like cooking dinner by simply moving around a pan on screen and doing new things around Melbourne with Krish in the form of developing photos. And the few interactions that have callbacks later feel a bit more consequential, like moving in Krish's belongings (that later are moved out).

Many of these mechanics-as-metaphors are later subverted as their relationship begins to fall apart. Just as it grew easier for them to have conversation, it becomes easier for them to piece together an argument in the form of a puzzle until it becomes a full on shouting match, Florence and Krish thinking less and less through what they're saying before it comes out. The two fall into the same monotony Florence faced at the beginning of her adult life, this time together. Strong, new mechanics are introduced to show them drifting apart: pieces of a torn picture or irreconcilable puzzle pieces. In maybe one of the strongest moments in the game after the puzzle conversations, the player has to completely stop doing anything as Florence and Krish walk side by side to let him go.

Following this moment, the game doesn't really go introduce any strikingly new mechanics to finish out the story. Florence calls her mom and actually talks this time. She gets herself out of bed and out of her depressive slump, finding Krish's paint set and beginning to paint. She is shown painting as seasons pass behind her. She later has a website that sells out of her paintings. Her accounting skills are brought back in a matching game where she handles the money she's bringing in. And at the very end, she's walking going through the gallery exhibition, greeting people there.

Because of the lack of new mechanics, the ending would almost feel like an afterthought were it not for the strong art direction and scoring. From here on out, *Florence* entirely relies on its story to keep the player engaged. And to be fair, given that narrative itself is the game's central concern, that's not necessarily a bad thing.

Strongest Element

What *Florence* does better than many similar games is to capture the experience of falling in love, and the ensuing heartbreak when it all ends. Most of this work is done by the game's structure and how it's supported by the actual mechanics, the color scheme, and the score. The game, in a way, is cyclical, as certain mechanics (the conversations-as-puzzles, tapping around on her phone, moving Krish in) are repeated throughout with minor variations to underscore the differences of the story at the time. The activities Florence does at the beginning of the game to represent monotony are tweaked and interspersed with new mechanics when she's dating Krish, a technique to show that her life is then characterized by novelty. In contrast, when she and Krish settle into the mundane together, the original mechanics are brought back. Certain mechanics are also subverted, such as the conversation mechanic being used to show the two of them arguing and Krish packing up in reverse to move out with his belongings like the player he placed in Florence's apartment when he moved in. The fall into and out of love is entirely accessible and recognizable in this structure, unlike most other games like it.

Unsuccessful Element

The main issue with *Florence* is that at times it doesn't seem to be sure of what it wants to be as a story— is it about Florence, or is about Florence and Krish and their relationship? Yes, she is the title character, but the bulk of the game seems to be centered around her *and* Krish. The game's ending, which is entirely devoid of Krish, while maybe realistic and meaningful (life does in fact go on after someone important exits one's life; moving on is important) seems unsatisfying and almost as if a loose end wasn't tied up. In fact, the entire sequence of Florence greeting people at her gallery exhibition seemed like the perfect setup for her to run into Krish and for the two of them to interact and accept that even though they care about each other, their time together was over and that's ok. That's what the natural solution feels like, although the argument against it could be on the same grounds of realism, that reunions like that that tie up loose ends don't really happen in life all that often. It's a hard thing to negotiate, balancing the satisfaction of the narrative with its meaning, and it's one that I don't think *Florence* was 100% able to stick the landing on.

Highlight

Maybe citing the first kiss of a romance as the best moment of the narrative is cliched, but *Florence* builds up to it so perfectly that it'd be hard not to call it the game's highlight. Perhaps the game's best mechanic-as-metaphor is how conversations are literally pieced together like puzzles and how those puzzles get easier to piece together as conversation gets easier for Florence on her dates with Krish. The fact that the puzzles

get easier as Florence and Krish get closer together on the screen makes the build up feel so natural and their eventual kiss like falling into something effortlessly. The kiss itself is a gorgeous animation on a pink background with swelling music, the image of which stays around long after the game has continued.

Critical Reception

The reviews to *Florence* were almost universally positive.

CJ Andriessen of *Destructoid* gave the game an 8 out of 10, and praised the relatable characterization of Florence done through simple mechanics for daily activities as well as how the intricacies of a burgeoning relationship are communicated entirely without dialogue. However, there's a decent amount of criticism levelled at the fact that the game's ending feels incongruous in how it focuses on the solo pursuit of art with the bulk of the game's focus having been on love. Furthermore, while much of the game is praised for how it builds the characters and the transitions they face, very little time is spent on Florence going from someone who does art as a hobby to making a profession out of it.

Jordan Erica Webber of *The Guardian* gave the game 4 out of 5 stars, similarly praising the game for its effective communication of falling in and out of love entirely through visuals, mechanics, and audio. Webber's main criticism is about the game's plot itself—it's pretty barebones and linear, and it relies on the player performing little interactions (and in a few places, not acting at all), which sometimes don't have a great effect on the story, to keep them engaged. However, that's also cited as one of the game's triumphs, so it's not without its upsides.

Lessons

- Most games suffer from a disconnect between the story and the actual gameplay. In most cases, the story feels like an afterthought, a paint job meant to give the gameplay a semblance of meaning. For truly effective narrative integration, games need to use their mechanics as metaphors for what's going on in the story. Rather than having its gameplay be entirely unrelated to the story and mainly serving as a roadblock, *Florence*'s mechanics and minigames serve to more effectively deliver that story. Instead of just showing you that conversation gets easier for Florence as she goes on more dates with Krish, the game makes you *feel* how it gets easier through the puzzles.
- Too much complexity can hurt a game's narrative. While nuance is good if it's achieved, games are a different medium from others in that they're not trying to simply communicate an experience; they're trying to get the player to be part of that experience. Couple that with issues of scope in the development process itself, and it's not often feasible for games to deliver an overly nuanced experience. One of the only places *Florence* falters is in its resolution of the title character's relationship with Krish, and it does so because it tries to be both a game focusing on a moment in time (Florence's relationship with Krish) and a game centered on Florence's overall development. While they're not entirely

disjointed experiences, the game seems to split its focus to one after focusing for so long on the other that it creates a disjointed overall experience that reveals that the game struggles to identify what it's saying.

- There is a space and a need for short, alternate gaming experiences. While it may seem at odds with my last point, short games can deliver just as powerful and meaningful of experiences as lengthy ones. *Florence* clocks in at just around 40 minutes, but it accomplishes its experience goals by focusing in on one particular moment in time (Florence's relationship with Krish and the aftermath) and exploring that well. The subject matter is also well outside what's normal for gaming, and that in combination with the game's length has definitely helped *Florence* find an audience outside of the traditional "gamer" demographic, which will become more and more important as the need to build experiences for a diverse audience grows.

Summation

Florence is an interesting game to talk about in terms of game narrative as it's debatable whether it's a game or just a storybook with interactive elements. But pushing that boundary is what makes the experience so compelling. *Florence* is unlike almost any other game out there in terms of content (a story about a normal girl, living a normal life, falling in and out of love) its approach to storytelling. What's compelling about *Florence* is the *narrative*, with the gameplay serving mainly to enhance it, not the other way around. It seeks to engage a different type of gamer and offer a new form of entertainment, not necessarily based on achievement or diversion, but on pure emotional experience. And if *Florence* leads to more games like it, then gaming will be all the richer for it.