

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: *Duet*
Platform: Android, iOS, PC
Genre: Action
Release Date: October 10, 2013
Developer: Kumobius
Publisher: Kumobius
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Tom Greenaway, Ivan Neeson

Overview

The 2013 mobile title *Duet* is focused on the concept of death. Centered around two circles, one red and one blue, the player must navigate through levels containing obstacles that continually get more difficult. Each circle relies on the other; when either hits an obstacle, you fail. And when you fail, the stage is stained with the red or blue, reminding you of your death on every attempt.

But the stains aren't meant to discourage the player; instead, the gameplay and narrative are designed to keep them going. Words spoken before each stage often encourage the player while occasionally doing the opposite. But, overall, they work together to create a minimal, abstract narrative about grieving, coping, and unity.

Characters

Duet's minimal take on storytelling includes no characters—explicitly. However, a pair of characters can be construed from the communication between the character speaking prior to each level, and who they're speaking to.

- **The Mourner** – Someone has died, and the Mourner was close to them. The Mourner is the silent listener in *Duet*, grieving the death of a loved one. They struggle to cope, but ultimately, with the help of the Comforter, they're able to navigate life without their loved one.
The game's levels are split into multiple different sections, some of which are named for the five stages involved in the Kübler-Ross Model. The Mourner experiences all of these stages, reflecting their experience in grieving, as well as serving as the point of relatability for the player as they go through the levels named for the emotional stages the Mourner goes through.
- **The Comforter** – Helping the Mourner through their time of grieving is the Comforter. Throughout the game, the Comforter addresses and speaks to the Mourner, issuing advice and motivation, and occasionally, her own grief. The

central storytelling method *Duet* utilizes comes in the form of her statements before each level, but the game gives as much information about her as it does the Mourner. With this, a vagueness of the relationship between the Comforter and the Mourner is formed, including whether the Comforter is dead or alive. At different points, *Duet* hints at the possibility of her being who the Mourner is grieving; and at other points, the game gives evidence for her being actively with the Mourner.

Breakdown

Duet thrives on minimalism; its art style made up of only four colors and two main shapes, its controls include only two options, and its narrative tells a story with as little detail as possible. This being said, the game's theme is a complex subject: death and grieving. Through the complete use of all of the game's elements—the gameplay, the aesthetic choices, and more direct storytelling methods—*Duet* is able to relay a story of death, mourning, and coping.

Many traditionally used elements of storytelling, from defined characters to a general story arc, are missing in *Duet*. Rather, the game attempts to tell a story following the modern realism “plot”, creating a narrative that is universally relatable for the player. Death is a subject that is inherently in many games, but it isn't often explored as a theme. When you die in many games, you simply reappear, with nothing changed. However, *Duet* takes a more in-depth look at how death affects us, how we cope, and how we are reminded of it.

The details of *Duet*'s narrative are left abstract and vague, but understanding it starts with the sections that the game is split up into: Ignorance, Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Guilt, Depression, Hope, and Acceptance. Each one is an emotional stage that someone may go through in reaction to the death of a loved one. This includes the Kübler-Ross Model, more popularly known as the Five Stages of Grief, a model that suggests five stages people go through when dealing with death (made up of, in a non-chronological order, Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance)^[1]. A progression can be found with these, as someone may experience each of these stages while grieving the death of someone they love.

Every level in *Duet* begins with a brief statement, each of which match the stage they fall under. For example, Ignorance is used as a sort of tutorial, mostly explaining how to play the game, and easing the player into the game's environment; while Depression responds to how one might deal with the depression of losing a loved one. These develop much of the game's narrative, with information on who the person speaking is, and who they're speaking to: the Comforter and the Mourner.

The Mourner experiences each of the stages that the game goes through: denying the death in Denial, blaming themselves in Guilt, and eventually accepting the death in Acceptance. The Comforter moves them through the stages, providing the support that the Mourner needs. Representing the Comforter is a woman's voice, soft and caring, giving a brief moment of calm to the player before each level begins; in the same way that her voice provides calm to the Mourner.

Duet's gameplay surrounds the survival of two circles, one red and one blue, as the player navigates levels made up of white obstacles. On collision with one of the obstacles, the level is reset, and that obstacle is stained with the color circle that hit it.

Each circle relies on the other, and one cannot live without the other. They turn in sync, move forward together, and reset together. This reinforces the theme of unity, bringing the gameplay into the narrative as one of its strengths.

“Your survival is dependent on protecting two vessels - they are devices in sync, a dance and song between two entities tethered together in symbiosis.”

- *Duet*'s Google Play page

Ignorance, Denial, Anger, Bargaining, and Guilt

Duet opens with Ignorance, which serves as an introduction to the game—hence the name, the player going from ignorance, to having an understanding of the gameplay concepts. While giving a brief tutorial, Ignorance also sets the game's overall tone: hopefulness. The Comforter ends Ignorance with encouragement for the rest of the game, and for the Mourner's period of coping after the death:

“Never give up. Some things are worth fighting for.”

- Ignorance IV and V

The emotion expressed by the Comforter carries over from Ignorance into the start of Denial, which becomes a trend for nearly every other stage—showing that the Comforter is reacting to the emotional state of the Mourner, as it isn't clear immediately. As Denial goes on, though, the Comforter picks up the Mourner's first response to the death: it didn't happen. *“Do not deny it,”* she says at the end of the section, *“Embrace it.”* One of the game's two jarring changes between sections follows, as the Comforter immediately refers to anger as the section it's named for begins. Though, as the Mourner continues through their anger, the Comforter begins to ease them, letting them know that their anger is natural:

“This need not define you.”

- Anger III

Her response to the Mourner's anger continues into Bargaining, but soon she understands their current stage, and in a similar fashion, the emotions move to Guilt. However, Guilt brings details about the Mourner and Comforter's relationship that create a question of who exactly the Comforter is—someone with the Mourner, still alive, or the person who had died.

“Regret has two sides. The things we do... And the things we wish we had done.”

- Regret II, III, IV

Depression

Depression overtakes the Mourner next, starting with the other sudden switch as it seems that the Comforter quickly takes notice: *“Nothing is wrong with you.”* However, the Mourner's depression takes some precedence, as it shifts to something more malicious, including *“You will not win.”* The Mourner is at their lowest here, but, the Comforter continues to push them through into Hope.

“I don't want you to keep going...”

- Depression VI

Hope

“I want you to want to keep going.”

- Hope I

In a contrast to the rest of *Duet*'s storytelling, Hope shifts from the Comforter speaking in response to a hopeful Mourner to the Comforter speaking in response to the depressive Mourner. She pushes them forward, motivating them to continue. *“We have*

no reason to give up,” she says, almost directly in response to pieces of Depression (best fitting Depression II: *“Why are you doing this to yourself?”*). Hope ends as the Mourner’s depression ends, and finally, they move into Acceptance.

Acceptance

The final stage is almost a summation of the Mourner’s emotional journey throughout the narrative. It calls back to Anger, Bargaining, and Guilt, while reflecting on the change they’ve experienced. Her statements here also add to the possibility of the Comforter being who the Mourner is grieving (most specifically, Acceptance VIII and IX). After the Comforter tells the Mourner to move forward in the penultimate level, the final sentence ends in an odd way, without saying anything substantial. However, finishing the last level, and completing the game, the last three words are spoken, a final reminder that the Comforter will be with the Mourner, even after their grieving:

“But I want you to know one last thing... I am here.”

- Acceptance IX

Strongest Element

Duet expertly utilizes its gameplay to strengthen its theme and narrative; however, its most successful piece is found in its primary method of storytelling. The tone of the Comforter’s words and how it changes are the strongest elements of the game.

Throughout the game, her words match the section their level corresponds to-- the most blatant example is in Denial V: *“Do not deny it.”* About halfway through each section is when the Comforter becomes more clear in their response to the Mourner’s current feeling, matching how people recognize emotion in others: gradually, and not instantly. With this, the transition between the tones of each section is perfected in *Duet*.

The best examples are found in Bargaining, Depression, and Hope:

“You cannot get out of this.”

- Bargaining III, a possible response to actions by the Mourner to escape the reality of the death.

“I don’t want you to keep going... I want you to want to keep going.”

- Depression VI to the next level, Hope I. This transition shows that hope is an emotion that the Comforter brings in, pushing the Mourner forward, but only on their own accord.

Unsuccessful Element

While *Duet*’s gameplay strengthens its narrative in many ways, it also is the cause of the narrative’s greatest fault: pacing. In combination with the brief story beats, the game’s levels and difficulty cause the player to hear and read the Comforter’s words, and forget them as they’re pulled into the level.

Describing *Duet*’s clash of story and gameplay as a ludonarrative dissonance wouldn’t be quite right—it’s more akin to a ludonarrative disconnect. The gameplay progresses, taking up more of the player’s time, without the narrative catching up and trying to get more of the player’s attention. The sparseness of the Comforter’s words, which are the principal method to move the plot, lead to players often interpreting them as strange one-liners, or “mantras for real-world success”, as Robert Carnevale called them on Tom’s Guide^[2].

In fact, player reactions are the most telling of *Duet*'s failure in this regard. Out of the five readable critic reviews listed for the game on Metacritic ^[3], all mention the game's difficulty, and only two—very briefly—mention the narrative or theme. Looking further than Metacritic, of the first 20 Google Play Reviews checked ^[4], 15 mention the difficulty, and only three mention the narrative.

Highlight

The game's final stage, Acceptance IX, begins like none of the other levels—without saying something substantial. The Comforter doesn't complete her sentence:

"But I want you to know one thing..."

Duet's strongest moment are the three words that follow, spoken when the final level is finished, and the game is completed:

"I am here."

With these three words, the Mourner has completed their journey. They've experienced the death of a loved one, fought with denial, anger, and depression, and come out ready to continue life. They still have the departed on their mind and in their heart, but the Comforter has helped them move on; and the Comforter isn't going to abandon them.

Accompanying these words are a merging of the two circles, rotating rapidly and coming together as the music cuts out, simple tones swelling and intensifying until the circles become one, and everything goes silent, leaving empty space for the voice to come in as it says its final words.

Critical Reception

Reviews and critical response to *Duet* are in low numbers already; finding critics discussing the narrative is near impossible. This is generally due to the abstract nature of the game, as well as the difficulty of the gameplay taking precedent over the story. However, looking at how reviews discuss the Comforter's words, or the themes of the game, *Duet*—in addition to the positive response it received for its gameplay—had a well-received narrative.

Touch Arcade – Nissa Campbell – 4.5/5 – “Each set of levels is given a title, one of the five Kübler-Ross stages of grief and a few things beyond. Meditations on the subjects lead into the action and carry the narrative.”

“But *Duet* is designed for death—it's made for failure.”

Eurogamer Spain – Xavi Robles – 8/10 – “It [each level] looks like a mirror that reflects the moods you will go through while playing, ranging from absolute frustration to revealing catharsis.” (Translated from Spanish)

Some misconceptions or different interpretations about the nature and existence of the narrative, as well as the theme, can also be found in reviews:

The New Yorker – Joshua Rothman – No Score – “The strangest thing about *Duet* is that it's presented as self-help: between each stage, you're given a small piece of advice. Some of it is about coping with failure, which seems appropriate, given how difficult the game becomes; the rest is about relationships.”

Lessons

- **A fleshed out story isn't needed to invoke a feeling in a player.** *Duet* lacks most traditional story features; it goes without naming their characters, or barely acknowledging their existence, it skips over the setting, and it ignores most narrative structures. Instead, *Duet* uses its minimalism to create a relatable, universal story about death and coping. None of the usual elements of story were needed to create *Duet*, exemplifying the ability to create captivating abstract realism in game stories.
- **Use every element to further the narrative and theme.** *Duet's* narrative and theme are heavily supported by every element and intricacy of its gameplay and aesthetic. This can be seen in the minimal artstyle—for example, focus is drawn to the circles (as they're the only non-black or white colored objects), as well as their survival (keeping the stage clean, without the splatters reminding the player of their failure)—and in the gameplay, with the need to keep both circles alive to complete a level. The use of these show how every element of a game can be utilized to strengthen and further its themes and story.
- **Pacing will make or break your narrative.** Pacing directly influences how a story is delivered to a player; make it too fast, and the player will be confused as to what just happened, or whether there's more. Make it too slow, and players will barely realize there was a narrative at all. The latter is the case of *Duet*, with gameplay splitting up the narrative to a point that recognizing the existence of a story feels more like theory than fact.

Summation

Many mobile games go by without being properly discussed and analyzed, due to the platform's reputation of lower quality, microtransaction reliant games. This leaves a lot of great games ignored—including *Duet*. The game, despite being an interesting take on dealing with death, is almost entirely without any analysis of its narrative. Not only is the game worthy of discussion, but it deserves discussion; *Duet* is a game that takes on a difficult topic like death, and does so expertly, becoming a prime example of abstract realism.

Works Cited

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