

Research Portfolio

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Module Name: Games for Positive Impact

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Module Code: ACCA4041

Yume Nikki

Yume Nikki [1] is an indie game developed by Kikiyama, the game is known for its surreal and non-linear exploration of a character's dreams. Unlike traditional games, it lacks dialogue, explicit objectives or a clear narrative structure. Instead, players explore the dream world of an isolated girl named Madotsuki, moving through strange and often unsettling environments that do not follow conventional rules of storytelling logic. This open-ended structure means that players are not guided through a set path but instead encourage to explore freely and interpret what they see in their own way. Each area of the dream world contains abstract imagery and symbolic characters, which can be interpreted differently depending on the player. This creates a highly personal experience, where meaning is not directly given but instead formed through exploration and reflection, as a result, players often develop their own theories about what the game represents.

One of the most significant ways the game creates a positive impact is through its representation of mental health [2]. The abstract environments, unsettling imagery and isolated withdrawal. Rather than directly explaining these themes through dialogue or narrative, Yume Nikki uses visual storytelling to reflect emotional states, allowing players interpret meaning in personal and subjective way.

The dream like worlds often feel empty, confusing or disconnected, which can mirror how individuals experiencing mental health struggles may perceive reality. This lack of clear direction or explanation can also represent feelings of uncertainty or being lost within one's own thoughts. Because of this, players may begin to reflect on these emotions more deeply, either relating the experience to their own feelings or gaining a better understanding of what other might go through.



ANATOMY DOOR – YUME NIKKI



ZALGO – YUME NIKKI [3]

While the game doesn't explicitly state these themes, its vagueness allows the players to interpret the experience in a personal and meaningful way.

This type of design encourages emotional engagement and self-reflection. Players are not told what to think or feel. Instead, they construct their own interpretations based on what they encounter. For example, certain areas of the dream world feel empty or oppressive, which can evoke feelings of loneliness or discomfort. This emotional response can help players link these to real life feelings.

Another key aspect is the game's emphasis on exploration without pressure. There are no enemies in the traditional game sense, no time limits and no failure states. This creates a calm, reflective experience where players can engage at their own pace, and not have to follow a set narrative, for some players this can be therapeutic, providing a safe space to explore freely.



ISOLATED ROAD – YUME NIKKI



EMPTY DOCKS – YUME NIKKI

The game also encourages creativity and community discussion, because its story is not explicitly explained, players often share theories and interpretations online [4]. This collaborative meaning making enhances the experience and encourages communication and analytical thinking, it transforms the game into a shared cultural discussion rather than a solitary activity.

On the design aspect of the game, Yume Nikki demonstrates how minimalism can be powerful and hold deeper meaning. By removing traditional gameplay mechanics, it shifts focus entirely onto atmosphere and emotional experience. This has influenced many indie developers [5] and contributed to multiple “walking simulators” and experimental narrative games. Overall, Yume Nikki provides a unique and positive experience by encouraging self-reflection and emotional awareness. Its abstract approach allows players to engage with complex themes in a personal way, making it a powerful example of how games can explore mental health without explicit storytelling.

Life Is Strange

Life Is Strange [6], developed by Dontnod Entertainment Max Caulfield a photography student who discovers she can rewind time to change fate.

One of the game's most impactful features is its exploration of real-world social issues, the game features topics such as bullying, mental health, grief and suicide are central to the narrative [7]. These themes are presented in a grounded and relatable way, making them accessible to players, the game favours more to particularly younger teenage audiences. An important example is the storyline involving a character experiencing severe emotional distress, the player is given the opportunity to intervene, using dialogue choices to influence the outcome. This interactive element encourages players to think carefully about their word's actions, promoting empathy and emotional intelligence. Unlike passive media, the game requires active participation, making the experience more impactful.

One of the most impactful moments in the game involves Kate Marsh, a student who experiences intense bullying and isolation because a video went around of her, leading to a suicide attempt [8]. In this scene, the player must carefully choose dialogue options to talk her down, which highlights the importance of empathy, active listening and understanding mental health struggles. This teaches the player about the importance and the severity of bullying and isolation and the impact it can have on a person's mental health.



KATE MARSH – SUICIDE ATTEMPT



MAX CAULFIELD - BREAKDOWN

The rewind mechanic is another important design feature [9]. It allows players to see the consequences of different choices, reinforcing the idea that actions have consequences. This can help players develop decision making skills and consider multiple perspectives before acting. However, the game also shows that not all consequences can be controlled which reflects real life uncertainty.

The game includes a strong level of representation, such as LGBTQ+ relationships and a diverse range of characters all presented in a natural and respectful way [10]. This inclusivity is woven into the story rather than feeling forced or added as an afterthought, which makes the characters feel more realistic and relatable. For example, relationships are shown as a normal part of characters' lives, rather than being defined only by labels or stereotypes. This approach helps players who may share similar identities feel seen and represented within the game world, this can create a stronger emotional connection to the story. At the same time, it allows players who may not have experienced these perspectives to better understand and empathise with different viewpoints and experiences and awareness, helping to normalise different identities and relationships within mainstream storytelling.

Additionally, the episodic structure of *Life Is Strange* encourages players to reflect on their choices between episodes, reinforcing the themes of consequence and responsibility [11]. Because there are breaks between each episode, players have time to think back on the decisions they made, reconsider alternative options and emotionally process how events have unfolded. This slower pacing makes choices feel more meaningful as players are not rushing through the story but instead sitting with the outcomes of their actions. It also influences community discussion as players share their decisions, debate moral choices and develop theories about future episodes. This creates a shared experience where different perspectives are compared, helping players understand that choices can be interpreted in multiple ways and that people can have different opinions and views. As a result, engagement extends beyond gameplay itself, deepening emotional investment in the story and strengthening the overall impact of the game's narrative themes.

Life Is Strange demonstrates how games can be used to explore serious topics in a meaningful way. By combining interactive storytelling with real-world issues, it encourages empathy, critical thinking and emotional awareness, it also teaches players on significant real-world problems, like mental health, suicide and issues within school. This makes it a powerful example of games as a tool for social and emotional learning.

Detroit: Become Human

Detroit: Become Human, developed by Quantic Dream [12], is an interactive narrative game set in a futuristic society where androids serve humans. The game explores themes such as artificial intelligence, freedom, identity and civil rights, using its story driven choices, it creates an experience that encourages ethical reflection and emotional engagement. The most significant positive impact the game has been its ability to present players with complex moral dilemmas, players control multiple characters, each facing difficult decisions that shape the outcome of the story. These choices often involve questions of obedience, sacrifice and resistance, encouraging players to think critically about their own values and the consequences of their actions.

A key scene that highlights the game's impact is the "Capitol Park" protest led by Markus. In this chapter players must decide whether to lead peaceful demonstration or a violent uprising against human oppression. This moment is particularly powerful because it mirrors real world civil rights movements [13] and forces players to consider different approaches to achieving justice. Choosing a peaceful protest may inspire public sympathy and support, while violent actions can create fear and escalate conflict. There is no perfect solution, and each choice carries lasting consequences for both the characters and the wider narrative.



CAPITOL PARK – DETROIT: BECOME HUMAN [14] FREEDOM MARCH – DETROIT: BECOME HUMAN

This scene teaches players about the complexity of social change and the importance of strategy, morality and public perception. It encourages reflection on how change is achieved in the real world, showing that progress is often not straightforward and can involve difficult trade-offs, players must consider whether their actions will gain support or create fear and how different approaches to protest can lead to very different outcomes.

By placing the player in a leadership role, the game encourages a deeper understanding of responsibility and the weight of decision making. Every choice can influence how the public, media and other characters respond, reinforcing the idea that leadership involves thinking beyond immediate goals and considering long term consequences. This helps players understand that social movements are shaped not only by intentions but also by the methods used to achieve them.

Overall, Detroit: Become Human demonstrates how video games can be used as a platform for ethical exploration [15], through key scenes like the Capital Park protest, it promotes empathy, critical thinking and social awareness, showing how interactive experiences can have a meaningful and lasting impact on players. By allowing players to directly experience the consequences of oppression, resistance and leadership, the game encourages them to reflect on how moral choices are made under pressure. This level of interactivity makes the message more engaging than passive media, as players are not just observing events but actively shaping them. As a result, the emotional weight of each decision is stronger, and the lessons learned are more likely to stay with the player after the game has ended.

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