

Game Narrative Review

=====
Your name: Zac Millman

Your school: Drexel University

Your email: zm352@drexel.edu

Month/Year you submitted this review: December 2024

=====
Game Title: Slay the Princess

Platform: PC (Steam), Releasing on other platforms fall 2024

Genre: Horror Visual Novel

Release Date: 10/23/2023

Developer: Black Tabby Games

Publisher: Serenity Forge

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Abby Howard

Overview

“You are on a path in the woods, and at the end of that path is a cabin. And in the basement of that cabin is a princess.” This simple sentence is all the player is given before gaining control of the unnamed player character whom I will call Slayer. In a strange and easily distorted pocket of reality Slayer must decide whether or not to slay the Princess trapped in the cabin, and then come to terms with the consequences of his choices. The game tells you very simply, both in the opening scene and with its title, that this is a story about killing a princess.

In reality, *Slay the Princess* is actually a story about the concept of love itself; what it means to love yourself, despite the choices you make, and about loving the world, despite what it has made you do. Like most visual novels built in RenPy, *Slay the Princess* limits player interaction to simply selecting a choice from a list provided in each moment; the game stands apart from others of this style because of the genre of its story and the unique and deliberate use

of time loops to tell that story. While the underlying theme is love, it is presented through a lens of existential horror and a story structure that simulates a deep loss of control, a feeling that is reinforced as the player continues to loop in on themselves. Through all the forests, cabins, Princesses, and deaths, the player is given a chance to learn and grow outside the game as much as Slayer does inside it.

Characters

- **Slayer** – the player character; he is barely seen in the game as it is played in a first-person perspective, but the short glimpses of arms and in the occasional mirror paint him as some kind of bird-like creature. He has talons and black feathers but walks upright like a human. Slayer begins his journey unaware of anything before the opening moments, with only the instructions of The Narrator to guide them in his supposed destiny: to slay the princess.
- **The Princess** – she is everything to Slayer; imprisoned in a basement in a cabin on a lonely path in the woods, the Princess first appears as a young woman with fair skin and long hair. The Princess is the only character the player interacts with that isn't a disembodied voice for most of the game. Due to this she can act as a narrative foil, a love interest, an antagonist, or even all three depending on your choices. Her personality is extremely malleable, changing how she reacts based on how the player approaches her. She is determined to escape her captivity and will do whatever is necessary to get the player to free her, from feigning innocence to full on murder. She is aware of the chapters, of time repeating itself, and this impacts her physical and emotional state throughout each loop as she evolves throughout the chapters. These forms are representations of how the player's actions changed her perspectives, reacting to what you do. She also seems to have some effect on the world around her, as the cabin and woods change based on her evolution.
- **The Narrator** – an opinionated guide; they describe the player's surroundings, narrate the player's actions as choices are made, and answer questions the player may have. They are a disembodied voice that can be heard by both the Princess and Slayer and seem to exhibit some amount of control over the player's actions. They are single minded in their goal of getting the player to kill the Princess and are not against forcing the player's

hands if need be. They are not simply an observer and will snap at the player if continually questioned or denied. They are unaware of the looping nature of the world, simply resetting at the start of a new chapter, but they can see the changes that happen as the Princess changes.

- **Voice of the Hero** – the good one; Voice of the Hero is the first voice that manifests inside Slayer's head and is by your side through each chapter and loop. He is, in many ways, the personality of a picture-perfect hero dedicated to saving damsels and spreading justice. He offers the player the option to save the Princess instead of slaying her, opposing the instructions of the Narrator. He prefers doing the right thing and is often mistrustful of the Narrator as the story progresses.
- **The Other Voices in Your Head** – a collection of side characters; at the beginning of chapters two and three of a loop a new voice will begin speaking, alongside the Hero and the Narrator. This voice will in some way relate to the ending of the previous chapter, acting as a foil to the Princess' new form. The voices are as varied as the Princess herself and represent Slayer's mind shattering as he endures countless forms of trauma from the loops. Aside from the Voice of the Hero there are 10 voices: Broken, Cheated, Cold, Contrarian, Hunted, Opportunist, Paranoid, Skeptic, Smitten, and Stubborn.
- **Her** – Your salvation beyond; a deific figure that comes to Slayer at the end of a full loop. She says she is an incomplete whole, a being missing its most important parts, and asks Slayer to help her gather them. In exchange, she can free him from the loop. These parts are the different forms the princess takes during later chapters of the game, each one providing Her with more memories, more feelings, and, seemingly, more power. Besides speaking through the most recently provided vessel, She manifests as countless glowing arms. She exists in a space outside of the loops, seemingly between the point of death and when Slayer reawakens in the woods. In this space there are no voices, no narrator, just Slayer and Her.

Breakdown

Slay the Princess is a visual novel, a type of storytelling game where the player chooses from a list of text options that move the narrative forward accompanied by 2D images illustrating the choice made. While the core mechanics and player interaction may follow that format, it is clear almost immediately that this is not a typical experience. The player in *Slay the Princess*, like many visual novels, sees the world in the first person through their character. However, the player makes no choices for their character, they are simply dropped into the opening scene as the Narrator begins speaking to them and their first choices appear. This type of *en media res* opening, along with the eerie music and hand drawn black-and-white environment, immediately feels off-putting among a culture of stories that follow a classic beginning-middle-end structure. There is no backstory, no set up, no explanation of where or who you are, just what you must do. *Slay the Princess* does an amazing job using the visual novel style, typically used for more lighthearted or down-to-earth narratives, to tell a story of existential horror. The narrative feels extremely personal, pulling the player deeper into the story with each choice they make, which makes the mounting dread even more powerful.

The Story Engine

In this analysis a “loop” refers to a full experience from the opening in chapter one to finishing your conversation with Her, a full act of the story. Within an individual loop, the player’s actions in chapter one will impact which chapter two they experience, which will in turn impact which chapter three they experience or if they experience one at all. The two most impactful reveals from each chapter are which voice will appear in the next chapter, and which form the Princess will take and thus which vessel will be provided to Her. There are 10 versions of chapter two, and then each version of chapter two can lead to two of the 11 versions of chapter three. A loop can also end after the second chapter depending on the choices the player makes.

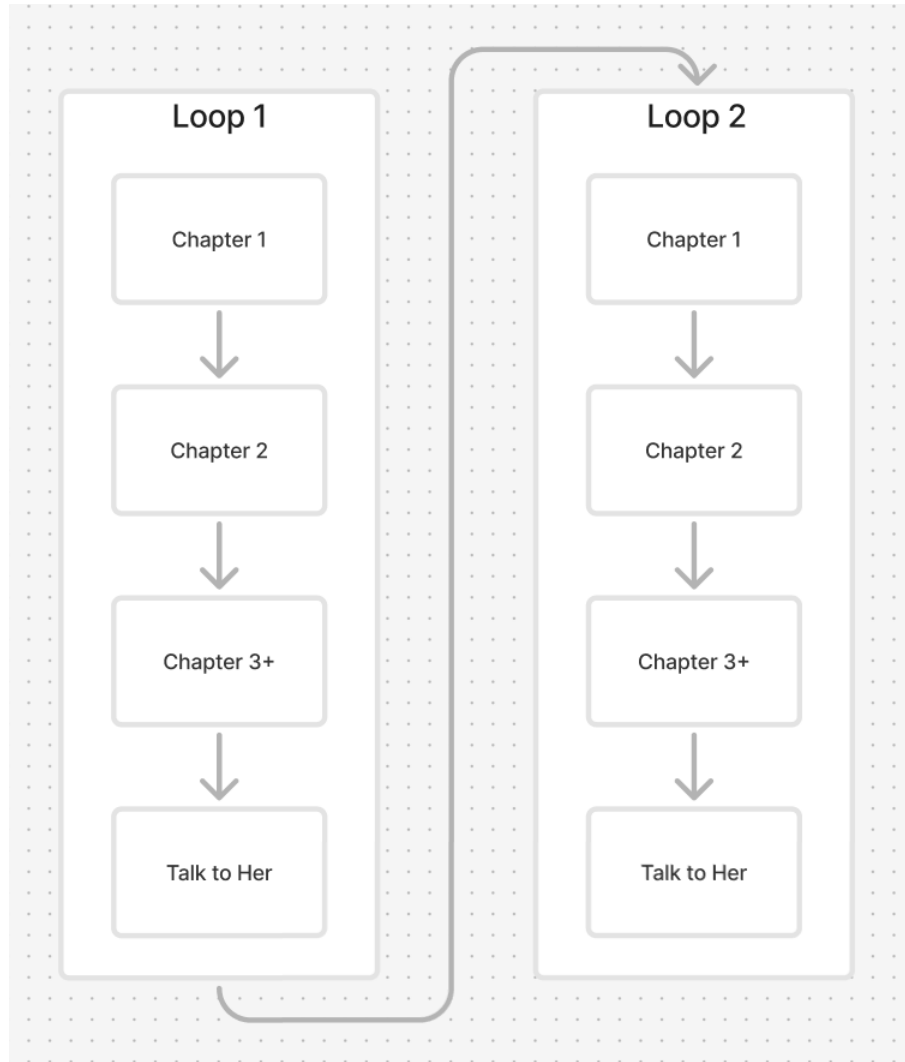


Figure 1: the contents of a loop

A departure from this structure comes when a player has gone through five full loops of the game, providing five vessels to Her. At this point the game will enter its final act and provide the player with an actual ending. This ending is impacted by both which vessels have been provided and the players' actions in this final act. There are technically nine different endings, represented by achievements earned after completion, but due to the way the game customizes the final act players will experience very different things even if they achieve the same finale. With this in mind, a complete playthrough would look like this:

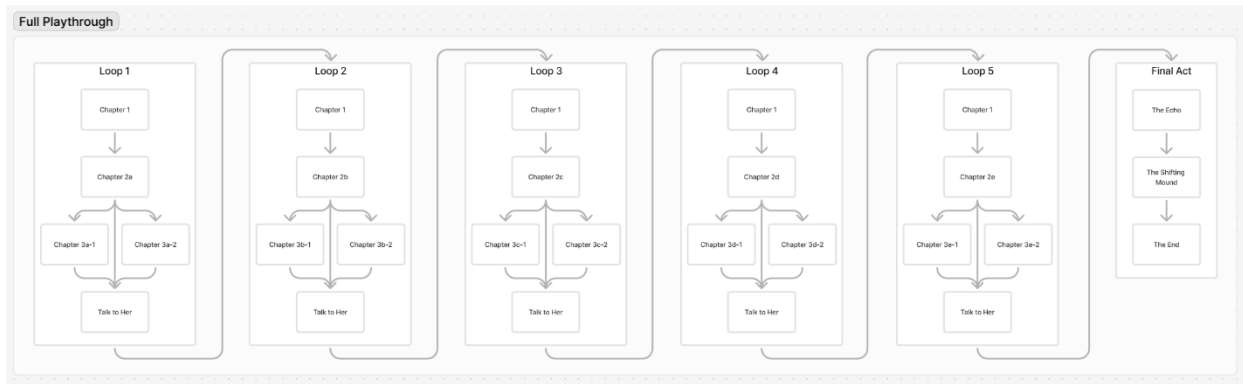


Figure 2: full playthrough structure

This is a pretty classic branching narrative formula, with two extremely impactful differences: the loops and chapters are happening to the world not to the player, and the player cannot make the same choices they have made previously. These two simple choices made by the developers let the story of *Slay the Princess* actually represent the feeling of learning and growing instead of simply feeling like there is no impact to your decisions.

Persistence in Loops

In *Slay the Princess* all loops, all endings, be they good or bad, happen within the story. Going back to the beginning, to the normal forest and normal princess, is not erasing the previous choices. An ending is not truly an ending, simply the beginning of the next step in the journey towards understanding. The world remembers what Slayer did before and as the player progresses through loops the characters also begin to remember. This contrasts most other uses of a time loop structure in games, where typically only the player and maybe the character they control are aware of the looping and the rest of the world is blissfully unaware of the consequences of the loops. In making all loops impact more than just one character, *Slay the Princess* avoids what YouTuber and game journalist Jacob Geller calls time loop nihilism. In his video essay of the same name, Geller discusses the way stories structured as time loops often don't engage with the impacts of the loop on the characters inside it, leaving players feeling as if their choices don't matter. This is also a common problem in game with a branching narrative, where each loop of the narrative and ending experienced are treated as separate worlds with no impact on each other.

To facilitate the player's understanding of the nature of the loops, characters in *Slay the Princess* have varying levels of awareness of the loops. This knowledge can be broadly separated into three levels:

1. **No Awareness** – the only character that has no innate awareness of the repeating nature of the world is the Narrator. They simply exist within a chapter and act as a guide to their world, getting confused and irritated if the player questions them on the loops or has knowledge they shouldn't yet.
2. **Chapter Awareness** – characters with this level of knowledge are aware of the repeating nature of the chapters but are not aware of the larger loops they exist within. The Princess and the Voice in Your Head exist in this tier, retaining knowledge from previous chapters and persisting until the final death of a loop. The characters in this loop are in some way powerful or deific, and the fact the Voices are here implies the player is not just a creature of fate.
3. **True Awareness** – in this final level of awareness, the characters have nearly the same level of understanding as the player. They know of the chapters, and the fact that they exist within loops. These characters are truly deific, this level containing Her and Slayer, again hinting at the deific origins of Slayer and his connection to Her.

Having multiple levels of awareness of these loops cements the idea that not only is the looping diegetic to the characters within, but it also builds the importance of accepting your choices no matter what. The player can't simply cast off their past decisions and be a new person, they have to accept the changes not only to the world but to themselves.

Pruning Branches

Black Tabby Games structured the branches of this narrative so that players would not repeat endings within a single playthrough. In many stories with branching narratives, there can come a point where the search for new endings can overtake experiencing the story. For me this comes when I start repeating through the same gameplay choices without achieving anything new, feeling like I'm just playing in circles. This is where the process of 'pruning' the choices enhances the narrative experience. It might seem counterintuitive to remove choices in a visual novel, a genre where the player already has very few ways to interact with the world, *Slay the Princess* does it in a way that seems natural. There is an incredibly complex web of changes

based on player choices making it difficult for players to fully notice when an option been lost. Additionally, the game weaves this mechanical element into the narrative itself, as Her is very clear about wanting unique vessels. As she can exercise some amount of control over the looping, it makes sense that she wouldn't let you bring something she already has when there is so much more to experience. This all ties together to reinforce both the distress of lost control and the necessity to accept the choices made. Not only does the world remember the choices that have been made in a playthrough, players can't experience the same exact branches but make new choices within them. The only option is to keep moving forward to new and different places, using what has happened before to guide how Slayer approaches these situations.

The Awakened Truth

Until this point *Slay the Princess*, and this essay in turn, have been lying to the player. More specifically there has been a deliberate hiding of the true nature of the world and the characters that inhabit it. There have been hints as the story has unfolded, especially during the conversations had with Her after delivering a vessel, but true understanding only comes at the end of a playthrough. After the fifth vessel is provided and everything again goes dark, the player wakes up for the final time. This time they wake up alone, no narrator to push them and no voices to advise, in the vast emptiness outside of the loops now known as The Long Quiet. In front of them stands a dark mirror, an object that has haunted the player throughout the game and slowly revealing their form. However now it shows no reflection, shattering into multitudes of shards upon approach. In these shards the first true nature of the world is shown: the identity of the Narrator. They are a leftover fragment of a dead man, an Echo as they call themselves, of the being that created everything within this looping nightmare they call the Construct. The Echo is fading now, which can be seen as the players ask them questions and the shards containing them shatter. Through this conversation the player learns the truth behind Slayer and the Princess, something that has been hinted at throughout the playthrough. The Princess is the Shifting Mound, a deity of change and transformation, of death and chaos. Her existence pushes the universe towards a state of entropy filled with constant suffering and death, and her form changes based on the perception of everyone who knows Her. To avoid this outcome the thing that became the Echo forced the cycle in two, creating You, whose true identity is The Long

Quiet itself. A deity made with the sole purpose of killing the Shifting Mound and keeping the world from oblivion.

This reveal further reinforces the theme of self-actualization through experiences as the Shifting Mound reveals herself. In an attempt to convince the player not to kill her but to join her in escaping the Construct she calls forth the previously killed vessels. They beseech or demean or uplift the player, trying to provide an explanation of his actions and a reason behind everything. But ultimately, as it always is with interactive media like video games, it is up to the player to make the final choice and to accept their place in the world.

Strongest Element

The collective characters of *The Voices in Your head* stand as the most interesting and engaging piece of *Slay the Princess*. They are both a representation of the psyche of Slayer and are each their own character, with different goals and plans to achieve them. Conceptually the voices are like the angel and devil on a player's shoulder, pushing them towards good or evil. Even when the voices assert their will on the player or the world, forcing things to happen without the input of the player, it is still Slayer making those decisions. When "The Broken" tries to force Slayer to listen to the Princess and slay the body, Slayer is still choosing to do this whether the player agrees or not. In many ways the player simply acts as another voice in Slayer's head, albeit with much more control over the body than any others, something that can be seen in the way the voices try to convince the player to listen to them. The internal arguments and discussions are not directed at the Hero, or the Narrator, or the Princess, no they are directed at the player themselves. This choice elevates the voices into something more than just a hallucination or a broken psyche, they become advisors to the player on their journey.

The appearance of a new voice after each death also works to tie Slayer and the Princess together in a more physical way. Just as the Princess changes physically in reaction to Slayer, he changes mentally based on the player's actions. As the Echo states in the final act of the story You and the Princess each have a piece of the other inside, a remnant of the messy division his predecessor enacted.

Unsuccessful Element

While in the final act of the story the mirror comes to represent something important, for most of a playthrough it is simply a vague hint at something beyond. This feels awkward in an otherwise very intentional game like *Slay the Princess* where everything else is deeply relevant. A big part of the mirror's failure is how heavy-handed the metaphor is, the mirror simply being used to outright show Slayer reflecting on how he has changed. This happens at the end of each loop, directly after talking to Her before starting the next loop. The placement of the mirror here does nothing to help it feel powerful, in fact it makes it feel small in comparison to the conversation with Her. Each loop has a different conversation at the end relating to which vessel the player provided, and these conversations do a much more engaging job of getting the player to reflect on their actions. The mirror doesn't even have an impact past the end of the world, when Slayer escapes the loops and fully ascends. At this point the mirror has been shattered and dissolved, its final impact simply a way for the player to ask questions to prepare for the true self-reflection. This lack of importance makes the mirror's prior appearances throughout the loops even less relevant and leaves me questioning if something is missing from its overall impact on the story.

Highlight

Through all the different iterations of the woods, the cabin, and the princess there is one path and vessel that stands out to me: the Razor. The Razor is one of only two paths that have a possible fourth chapter, all other branches end during either the second or third, and it uses this additional act to force the player to come to terms with the amount of control they have over their choices.

The first two chapters of this branch follow the same formula as much of the rest of the story: Slayer arrives in the normal woods, goes to the cabin, either kills or saves the Princess, then is revived in mostly the same woods with a warped cabin and princess. The razor path is initiated in Chapter One when the player chooses to doubt the Narrator when he says the Princess is unarmed in her cell. A worry that was well-founded as when Slayer does attack the Princess retaliates, hiding a knife behind her back just as sharp as Slayer's. This distrust of both the Narrator and the Princess is a central theme to this branch that is not seen in the rest of the game.

Other branches are filled with fear, with anger, with despair, but a branch built on lies is a different experience entirely. Even when the player knows they are being lied to there isn't anything they can do to be sure of their choices, making it impossible to simply accept their actions. A feeling of uncertainty in themselves will always exist in the back of both Slayer and the player's minds. In Chapter Two the player is introduced to the primary voice for this branch: the Voice of the Cheated. As the name suggests he feels Slayer was cheated in Chapter One, blaming the Narrator for lying and seeking vengeance on the Princess. Unlike other voices who seek revenge or further violence, The Cheated is extremely hostile toward the Narrator. After talking in circles in the basement of the cabin, the first moment of real change happens: the Princess takes the initiative. "Okay, I'm bored now." she states, shocking the Voices and the Narrator, before rushing at the player with a blade replacing her arm. Slayer is unceremoniously eviscerated as he tried to defend himself, and from here on the reality of the game begins to crack.

Chapter Three opens in a field of blades, but as the Narrator begins to describe the scene they are interrupted. Now the Cheated takes the reins, deciding Slayer is starting in the cabin. Instantly, the scene shifts. Control is wrested from the Narrator leaving them confused and disoriented as another break in the formula, a crack in reality, occurs: two new voices manifest instead of the usual one, the Broken and the Hunted. In the basement, the narrative splinters even further: the Princess drops all pretenses and continues the cycle of violence and death, immediately revealing her bladed arms and charging Slayer. The third act of this branch is quick, but that is a small mercy as everything finally shatters. Instead of waking up on the path or even in the cabin, Slayer now wakes up already in the basement with the Princess ready to fight again. A new voice appears, the Smitten, and now Slayer's psyche begins to crack as the Cheated and the Hero understand how new voices manifest. The Narrator no longer hides their knowledge of the loop, the distress of a broken cycle too much for them. Again, Slayer is quickly skewered by the Princess, again he awakens with the Princess, the cycle repeating so rapidly and so often that the only memory retained is of his death. Fittingly, the title of this chapter is *Mutually Assured Destruction*, the Princess and Slayer honing each other into sharper and sharper weapons endlessly. But as the deaths stack up, a new feeling appears. From the spite and distrust, a feeling of hope, of belief in oneself emerges. With this newfound conviction the, Voices agree that the next resurrection will be the end of this torture.

Chapter 4 now opens in the cabin, before the Narrator is quickly overruled into simply taking us to the Princess. In the darkness between scenes the Cheated says “Don’t care. Just want to win,” a single-minded focus echoed by the rest of the Voices. Much like the Narrator, the player is given no options here. Slayer and his voices have clearly prepared for this: there is nothing to do but follow their plan. In the basement the Princess’ body explodes and reveals a humanoid mass of blades. The only flesh remaining is her heart still beating in her metallic ribcage. The Voices begin arguing and complaining at this sight, The Cheated exclaims he is done, and the player is finally given a chance to interact. The choice, though there is only one, is simply [Empty your mind]. And so Slayer does, the cabin shifts back to the original basement, and the voices are quiet again. By clicking the next button labeled [Him too.], both Slayer and the Princess are transported into the Long Quiet. A final fight between Slayer and Princess ensues and Slayer emerges victorious, the arms of Her claiming the Razor.

The reveal that Slayer has control over this reality is impactful no matter where in the run the player gets this branch. The feeling of the game’s structure breaking and the clear wrongness of chapters 3 and 4 make this a standout in an already impressive narrative. Just the fact there is a fourth chapter is already a huge departure from the rest of the game, and then the multitudes of deaths and voices leading up to Slayer finally taking the reins is stunning to play through. Not only is the Razor branch a great experience on its own, it also makes the overarching story of *Slay the Princess* much more exciting to learn. Slayer’s control of reality leaves a powerful division between control and acceptance of actions; if Slayer has had this much control the entire time, what does it mean for him to accept his previous choices? The clear implications of there being more to reality push the player to get to the final act, something that can be difficult in branching or looping narratives.

Critical Reception

PCGamer by Robin Valentine – Valentine, impressively avoiding major spoilers especially for the final act, praises *Slay the Princess* for its ability to follow through on the main question of the princess: are you sure you want to kill her. He marvels at the massive number of branches in the game and how “it keeps all of them spinning at once.” Valentine praises the game’s overall structure, noting that the player is incentivized to “discover dozens of possible answers” to the central question of what the princess is. His most salient critique with the game is the feeling that

the looping can make the overarching mystery a bit obtuse, but even this is overshadowed by the engaging narrative structure and story.

NoisyPixel by Yuna Briggs (100/100) – In their extremely in-depth review, Yuna Briggs highlights the use of meta-narrative in enhancing the story of *Slay the Princess*. They praise the immediate intrigue and mystery the game fosters with its opening, giving the player just enough information to be interested but not enough to have every answer. In discussing the many different outcomes of even the first scene, Briggs also applauds the uniqueness of player experience with the game; “it’s truly immersive to see just how many layers there are” they say, echoing this sentiment later with the excitement of experiencing the different chapters. The art style also serves to elevate the story as Briggs says “the visuals enhance the grim horror of certain scenes” and the voice acting pushes from an incredible story to a masterful narrative. Their main issue with the game is that there is no easy way to return to specific sections and no in-game choice tree which can make re-finding your favorite story beats difficult.

KeenGamer by Jasmine Nguyen (9.5/10) – Jasmien Nguyen sees *Slay the Princess* as an impressively immersive experience, from the story to the visuals to the audio design. She discusses how the lack of complexity in mechanics makes the impact of each decision feel meaningful in a way that is hard to capture, urging readers to experience it for themselves after finishing the review. Even when the gameplay felt repetitive, the incredible audio design kept Nguyen engaged. Being fully voice acted definitely works in *Slay the Princess*’ favor, giving each character more depth than what can be done with only writing.

Lessons

- **Limited Choice can Amplify a Story** – Recent trends in story-focused games, especially from large studios, have pushed for a massive degree of player freedom in vast open worlds. Instead, *Slay the Princess* offers players very limited choices in their actions. This is present in every aspect of the game, right down to the choice to make a visual novel which is already a very restrictive genre to player actions. This is ideal for the narrative *Slay the Princess* is telling, as by restricting the player’s choices each

individual action becomes more powerful which then makes accepting those actions even more important. Players cannot afford to be flippant with their actions, they have to be ready for whatever consequences may come from their decisions. In turn this amplifies Slayer's lack of control over their fate, as well as the player's loss of control over the game.

- **Fleshed out Branches** – *Slay the Princess* feels different from other branching narrative stories because its narrative branches are all equally essential to the main plot. Often some branches in a story are cast aside to make way for a true ending or ideal path, railroading what is supposed to be an experience focused on player choices; here each branch is just as impactful to the ending of the story as each other one leading to players feeling like what they did made their experience unique. In this way *Slay the Princess* is a model game across genres should look to, as what does infinite choice matter if the outcomes of all those choices are the same.
- **Vague \neq Exciting** – For all its excellent writing, the vague pieces in a mystery story don't always lead to an exciting reveal. If there are simply extra pieces that seem important, it creates bloat in a game that can feel disappointing if and when an explanation is given that doesn't include the extra piece. In *Slay the Princess* this is represented by the mirror, an object that's reveal doesn't do enough to justify the lack of interaction during the story.

Summation

In a world full of branching narratives, *Slay the Princess* stands as a shining example of what can be done with this genre. Using the narrative structure itself, the looping and rewinding reality, as a storytelling device creates a complete experience that always centers the player and their choices. Even in a story with theoretically world-defining consequences the player is always the driving force of the narrative, their personal journey directly changing what they next experience. The major themes of self love and understanding of your place in the world are consistently reinforced by both the actions of the player and the reactions of the NPCs. Occasionally, the story can feel a bit obtuse or unnecessarily vague, but these moments are reconciled by the synthetic nature of the final act. The experience of playing through *Slay the*

Princess is one of reflection and consequence, on the understanding that your actions have consequences even if you weren't ready for them.

Citations

1. Briggs, Yuna. "Slay the Princess Review – Casting Shadows and Unveiling Secrets." *Noisy Pixel*, 8 Jan. 2024, noisypixel.net/slay-the-princess-review.
2. Geller, Jacob [Jacob Geller]. "Time Loop Nihilism." *YouTube*, 12 Nov. 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZrEayPIrVE.
3. Nguyen, Jasmine. "Slay the Princess Review: A Twist on a Classic Fairytale." *KeenGamer*, 3 Nov. 2023, www.keengamer.com/articles/reviews/pc-reviews/slay-the-princess-review-a-twist-on-a-classic-fairytale.
4. *Slay the Princess Wiki | Fandom*. slay-the-princess.fandom.com/wiki/Slay_the_Princess_Wiki.
5. Valentine, Robin. "Slay the Princess is 2023's most fascinating horror game, a visual novel that twists itself around every choice you make." *Pcgamer*, 21 Nov. 2023, www.pcgamer.com/slay-the-princess-is-2023s-most-fascinating-horror-game-a-visual-novel-that-twists-itself-around-every-choice-you-make.