

A Game Design Based on the Discourse of the Analyst: Yume Nikki

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Introduction

Many mainstream games, especially those organized around progression systems, quests, rewards, and measurable feedback, can be understood through a behaviourist logic. These games use quest system to guide the player's progress, combat or puzzle systems to provide measurable challenges, reward feedback to confirm whether the player has followed the prescribed interaction procedures, and narrative to give symbolic meaning to these actions. In this sense, video games can be understood as models of a libidinal economy: systems that reproduce desire. During gameplay, most games offer the player a symbolic system in which demands are clear, feedback is transparent, and enjoyment can be managed. This is a micro-model that continuously provides "surplus-jouissance." The subject's lack is handed over to the game's symbolic system, and many games sustain the player's desire by repeatedly promising a satisfaction that is always about to arrive.

Japanese independent game Yume Nikki (ゆめにつき, usually translated as Dream Diary), however, almost entirely refuses these conventional design logics. It has no quest system in the traditional sense, no clear condition of victory, no combat, and almost no dialogue or scripted narrative. What the player can do is simply control the protagonist, Madotsuki, as she moves back and forth between her room and the

dream worlds: wandering, observing, collecting objects called “Effects” (most of “Effects” do not contribute to character growth or narrative progression), and encountering a series of images, spaces, and events that resist explanation.

This essay argues that the significance of Yume Nikki does not hide in the possibility that it conceals some final metaphorical narrative that waits to be decoded. Instead, its importance lies in the way it transforms the absence of narrative itself into a structure of desire. Drawing on the theoretical resources of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, this essay analyses how Yume Nikki organizes the player’s desire through dream spaces, useless reward mechanisms, unspeakable images, and authorial silence. Mainstream game design often organizes and manages the player’s desire through behaviourist feedback loops, providing the player with constantly renewed guidance and knowledge while claiming, or at least implying, that sufficient enjoyment can be obtained by following its instructions. Yume Nikki, by contrast, operates around lack. It does not directly tell the player what they should look for, nor does it finally give the player the thing they seek. Instead, it repeatedly confronts the player with an object that seems meaningful but can never be fully possessed.

Therefore, unlike many narrative interpretations of Yume Nikki, this essay does not attempt to diagnose Madotsuki’s psychological condition, nor does it try to reduce every dream image or landscape to a fixed semiotic meaning. The more important

question is not “What lies behind these metaphors?” but “Why do players so strongly desire these images to be metaphors in the first place?” From this perspective, behind Yume Nikki’s appearance of dreams, loneliness, or psychic repression, it is a contemporary visual object concerned with how subjective desire is produced through images, spaces, and rule-based structures. It reveals a logic of game design fundamentally different from the behaviourist reward model: the player’s investment does not come from the satisfaction of desire, but from the continuous deferral of desire under the condition of its impossibility.

Context: Yume Nikki, Independent Game Culture, and the Absence of

Explanation



Figure 1. Kikiyama, *Yume Nikki* (ゆめにっき), 2004. Steam header artwork for the 2018 Steam

release. Digital promotional image. Source: Steam, accessed May 15, 2026.

Yume Nikki was created by the Japanese developer Kikiyama, who works under a pseudonym, and was developed using RPG Maker 2003. Unlike the highly collaborative, branded, and market-oriented production model of the commercial game industry, the production background of Yume Nikki has long remained in a state of mystery. Kikiyama has almost never publicly explained their identity, nor have they offered much clarification about the meaning of the work. This absence of authorial information has profoundly shaped the reception of the work. Because of the lack of an official explanation, players cannot simply return the dream images, characters, and events in the game to the author's intention. Meaning is no longer guaranteed by an authoritative Other, but is continuously produced through players' acts of playing, remembering, taking screenshots, drawing maps, participating in forum discussions, creating fan works, and repeatedly interpreting the game.

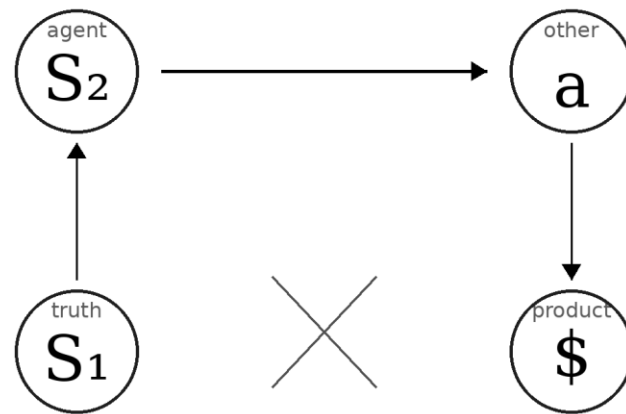
In terms of game form, after entering the dream world, the player can pass through different doors and enter numerous spaces with highly varied styles and no clear causal connections between them. The game rarely tells the player why a particular space is important, nor does it often explain the meaning of a particular object or event. Even the mechanism of "Effects," which appears to resemble a reward or item system, does not always provide a clear practical function. More often, these Effects change Madotsuki's appearance, bodily state, or mode of interaction with the world, rather than bringing the player closer to a victory condition in the traditional sense.

This design makes Yume Nikki difficult to place within the framework of the traditional RPG or adventure game. It uses the formal shell of RPG Maker, yet weakens the structures of growth, combat, quests, and character development commonly found in RPGs. The spaces within the game are more like a series of dream fragments: some areas are empty and repetitive, some are filled with strange creatures or abrupt images, and some seem like distorted echoes of everyday life. As the player moves through these spaces, they are not progressing from ignorance toward knowledge, but rather continuously sliding between fractured signifiers.

Yume Nikki is not simply a “game without a plot,” but a visual experience that takes absence, fragmentation, and silence as its formal principles. In a broader context of contemporary art, Yume Nikki has a structure similar to some contemporary artworks that lack complete meaning: it does not provide the player with a preexisting meaning, but compels them to continue interpreting within an environment that lacks explanation. Its dream worlds are not a puzzle box waiting to be decoded, but a visual system that continuously stimulates the desire to decode while repeatedly frustrating that desire.

Mainstream Game Design, the Discourse of the University, and the Reversal of Yume Nikki

Discourse of the University



Redrawn after Jacques Lacan, Seminar XVII, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*.

Figure 2. Discourse of the University. Diagram redrawn by the author after Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007).

If many mainstream video games sustain the player's participation through goals, feedback, and rewards, then this design logic can be understood through Lacan's "discourse of the university." In the discourse of the university, what occupies the position of the agent is not the naked command of the master, but knowledge itself, namely S₂: a seemingly neutral, rational, and systematized set of rules, instructions, goals, paths, and evaluative mechanisms. What this knowledge addresses is objet petit a, the object-cause of the subject's desire, while the truth concealed behind this system of knowledge is the master-signifier, S₁. In other words, mainstream games usually do not present themselves as the Imperative of Enjoyment directly. Rather,

through quest lists, map markers, collection percentages, skill trees, achievement systems, difficulty curves, and reward feedback, they organize the player's desire into a manageable symbolic structure. The player appears to be exploring freely, yet this freedom has often already been formatted in advance by a system of knowledge: where it is worth going, what is worth collecting, what kinds of action will be recognized as progress, and what forms of feedback will be understood as success have all been arranged in advance by the game's symbolic system.



Figure 3. Nintendo, *Donkey Kong Bananza*, 2025. Nintendo Switch 2 box art. Digital promotional image. Source: Nintendo Everything, “Donkey Kong Bananza Boxart, Screenshots,” sourced from Nintendo official promotional materials, accessed May 15, 2026.

Donkey Kong Bananza is a clear example of this design paradigm. The game organizes the player’s overall action through the long-term narrative goal of “going deeper underground” and reaching the Planet Core. Within each local area, however, it also constructs a dense network of micro-goals through Banandium Gems, coins, fossils, challenge stages, skill points, map hints, and hidden locations. Banandium Gems can be used to earn Skill Points, while Hand Slap allows the player to detect hidden objects through sonar; Pauline’s singing can also help show the player the way forward or guide the route to a destination. The player’s goal is guided at different levels. The long-term goal provides narrative direction, short-term goals provide immediate stimulation, and collection thresholds and ability growth recode these repeated actions as “progress.”

What is worth noting here is that the collection experience in *Donkey Kong Bananza* is not merely a reward mechanic in the traditional sense, but a highly compressed mechanic for producing surplus-enjoyment. Because *Donkey Kong*’s bodily abilities and destructive actions are designed to be highly direct, the cost of obtaining many micro-rewards is significantly reduced. The player often does not need to engage in complex reasoning; they only need to follow terrain, markers, or sonar prompts to the next point of interest, then strike, destroy, collect, and

immediately receive intense audiovisual feedback. Donkey Kong can also “smash,” “carve tunnels,” “punch straight down into the ground,” and tear off chunks of terrain to throw; this destruction-centered logic of action closely binds collection to bodily pleasure. Therefore, the game does not simply place rewards in front of the player. Rather, it transforms the cycle of “go forth—destroy—discover—collect—receive feedback—upgrade” into a low-cost, high-frequency, strongly reinforced apparatus of jouissance.

This mechanism bears a certain resemblance to the logic of consumption on short-video platforms, such as TikTok — the subject constantly slides toward the next consumable object, and each object promises a small, immediate, and quickly replaceable satisfaction. Yet there is also an important difference between the two. In short-video consumption, this repetitive enjoyment often returns to the subject as a certain emptiness, because this consumption conflicts with the capitalist ethics of efficiency, productivity, and self-improvement. The subject experiences a kind of reflexive void in the split of “I know this is meaningless, but I continue watching anyway.” By contrast, surplus-enjoyment in mainstream games can usually be more easily symbolically accommodated. Because the game could stitch them into long-term goals, numerical growth, completion rates, narrative progression, and the overcoming of challenges, the player’s repetitive actions can be interpreted as “I am progressing through the game,” “I am becoming stronger,” “I am completing the collection,” or “I am approaching the ending.” In other words, the game’s symbolic

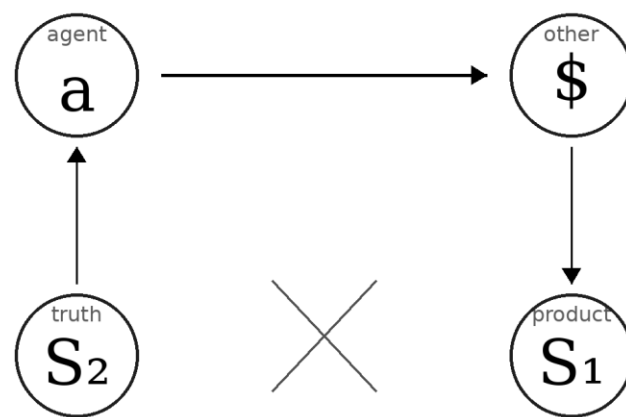
system temporarily takes responsibility for the subject's lack, so that repetition does not have to return in the form of pure emptiness.

However, this university-discourse-like model of game design still contains its own impossibility. As a system of knowledge, S2 can continuously provide new goals, new items, new challenges, and new explanations, but it cannot truly eliminate the subject's lack. After the player has experienced the same feedback loop enough times, the object that once appeared so attractive gradually loses its seductive power. The game, which could effectively take use of the university's discourse, must continue to produce new objects of desire: new areas, new skills, new collectibles, new enemies, new narrative suspense, or new thresholds of completion. If the game can no longer provide such objects, the player's desire shifts elsewhere, and their motivation to continue playing diminishes. The effectiveness of the discourse of the university lies precisely in its capacity to organize desire continuously in the form of knowledge. Yet its limitation also lies here: it must endlessly renew both knowledge and objects, or else the lacking subject that it had concealed will reappear.

By contrast, Yume Nikki refuses from the beginning to place the player's desire within this kind of stable system of knowledge. It does not provide stable meanings. The images, landscapes, characters, and events in the game are not presented to the player as "knowledge." Instead, they appear as fragments that are incomprehensible, not fully translatable, and impossible to integrate completely symbolically. S2, which,

as Kikiyama’s knowledge of this game is also absent, players cannot rely on the Other to explain which dreams “really mean.” Here, the Other does not appear as the guarantor of meaning. What the player faces is not an already organized system of knowledge, but an object that continuously withdraws explanation.

Discourse of the Analyst



Redrawn after Jacques Lacan, Seminar XVII, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*.

Figure 4. Discourse of the Analyst. Diagram redrawn by the author after Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans.

Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007).

For this reason, Yume Nikki comes closer to the structure of what Lacan calls the “discourse of the analyst.” In the discourse of the analyst, what occupies the position of the agent is objet petit a, and what it summons is the divided subject, \$. In the clinical practice of Lacanian psychoanalysis, the analyst does not directly provide

knowledge, nor does the analyst command the subject through a master-signifier. Instead, through silence, withdrawal, and opacity, the analyst causes the subject to begin speaking, associating, and interpreting. Yume Nikki operates in a similar way: the game itself confronts the player like an objet petit a. It seems meaningful, yet refuses to state its meaning; it seems to hide a certain truth, yet repeatedly causes this truth to slip away from the player's grasp. The player does not continue playing because the game provides enough knowledge, but because the game refuses to provide knowledge, thereby compelling the player to produce new knowledge.

From this perspective, the randomly triggered events, unpredictable spatial connections, highly free route choices, and unexplained images in Yume Nikki are not design emptiness or incompleteness, but the core of its structure of desire. They continuously interrupt the interpretations that the player has already formed, preventing the player from stabilizing the game as a complete story. The player always constructs meaning retroactively: an image that first appears merely as a strange visual stimulus may later be reinscribed into a temporary interpretive structure after the player has experienced more dreams, collected more Effects, and encountered more inexplicable events. In other words, the player does not receive a ready-made master-signifier, S1, from the game. Instead, the player produces new S1 through a process of repeatedly failed interpretation. The uniqueness of Yume Nikki lies precisely in the fact that it does not satisfy the player's desire but allows the player to directly experience that desire operates around lack.

Madotsuki as an Empty Mirror: Control, Identification, and the Failure of Mastery

If Yume Nikki, in its overall structure, comes closer to the discourse of the analyst, then the player's relationship with Madotsuki can also be understood through Lacan's theory of the mirror stage. What Lacan calls the mirror stage is not merely the child's experience of recognizing itself in the mirror. Rather, it describes the process by which the subject imaginatively confirms its own unity through an external, seemingly complete image. This image gives the subject the illusion that "I can become a whole," but this unity is, from the very beginning, a form of misrecognition. The subject does not first possess a complete self and then confirm it in the mirror. On the contrary, the subject misrecognizes in the external image a wholeness that it does not yet possess.

The character image in video games often serves a similar mirror function. The player does not merely look at the character; rather, the player occupies a bodily position through controlling the character. The game interpellates the player in a specific way: the character on the screen, the controllable body, the executable actions, and the feedback generated by input together issue an implicit call to the player — "this is your position." Therefore, the identification between the player and the game character does not arise solely from narrative empathy or the character's psychological depth. It emerges from a more fundamental structure of control. The

player presses a button, and the character moves; the player chooses a direction, and the character passes through it; the player enters the dream, and the character enters it as well. It is precisely within this continuous correspondence between input and feedback that the player obtains an imaginary sense of bodily unity.

Madotsuki's specificity lies in their being almost an empty, silent, and unexplained subject position. They has very little dialogue, no explicit psychological monologue, and no fully developed personal history. It is difficult for the player to understand her as one might a conventional narrative character, through personality, motivation, or narrative background. Instead, the player's identification with Madotsuki is established more strongly on the level of control. As a controllable body, she functions as the medium through which the player enters the dream spaces. Precisely because of her silence and blankness, she becomes easier for the player to temporarily occupy. The player does not identify with her because they "know who she is"; rather, the player treats her as their own position because they can act through her.

This clearly distinguishes her from many characters in complex action games. In a high-intensity action game such as Bayonetta, for example, the character's image is usually shaped as an extremely powerful, fluid, spectacular, and masterful body. Yet in actual play, the player frequently encounters failure, such as interrupted combos, mistimed dodges, being hit by enemies, or misjudging the rhythm of combat. In other

words, a gap repeatedly opens between the perfect body of the game character and the player's actual operational ability. The player attempts to occupy this powerful image, but is frequently reminded by failure that this image does not fully belong to them. By contrast, the basic controls of Yume Nikki are extremely simple. These interactions rarely constitute a technical barrier once the player becomes familiar with them. It is precisely this simplicity of control that makes it easier for the player to maintain a narcissistic identification. Madotsuki's body does not often resist the player through failure, nor does it expose the distance between player and character through difficult operations. She is more like a quiet mirror, allowing the player to project onto her their own desire to observe, wander, and interpret.



Figure 5. Kikiyama, *Yume Nikki*, 2004. Screenshot of Madotsuki's room, including the balcony/window door. Source: Yume Wiki, "Yume Nikki:Madotsuki's Room," accessed May 15, 2026.

However, this identification is not stable. Although most scenes in the game take place in the dream worlds, *Yume Nikki* still provides a so-called real world: Madotsuki's room and balcony. This "real life" space appears more stable, more logical, and closer to an interpretable subject-position than the dream worlds. Precisely because the dream worlds are disorderly, oppressive, and inexplicable, the real room is retroactively produced as a relatively meaningful anchor. After encountering unexplained images and events in the dreams, the player often returns to Madotsuki's body and her room as the starting point from which everything else might be explained: perhaps these dreams come from her psychological trauma; perhaps the room suggests her rupture from the outside world; perhaps her refusal to leave can be understood as an allegory of the Japanese hikikomori phenomenon.



Figure 6. Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas* (The Maids of Honour), 1656. Oil on canvas, 318 × 276 cm.

Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid. Digital image from Wikimedia Commons / Prado in Google Earth, public domain, accessed May 15, 2026.

Yet the problem is that although Madotsuki's body and room seem to provide an anchoring point within the symbolic order, they cannot truly stabilize meaning. They are more like the king and queen reflected in the mirror in Velázquez's *Las Meninas*: the viewer seems able to occupy that position, seems able to become the center of the figures' gazes, and seems able to obtain sovereignty over the structure of looking. Yet this position is never stable. The gazes of the figures in the painting, the obscured canvas, the presence of the painter himself, and the limited and ambiguous reflection

in the mirror all cause the viewer to be both included in and excluded from the image. The viewer believes that they stand outside the picture and master the act of looking, but in fact they have already been organized, captured, and looked at by the picture itself.

Madotsuki and the real room in Yume Nikki perform a similar function. The player seems able to obtain a central position from which to interpret the dream worlds by occupying Madotsuki's body. They also seem able to stitch the disorder of the dreams back into some kind of symbolic narrative through the real room. The ending, in which Madotsuki commits suicide, is especially easy to read as a retroactive master-signifier: it appears to provide a tragic interpretive framework for all the preceding dream images, encouraging the player to reorganize all the dreams as expressions of trauma, loneliness, repression, or a death drive. Yet this anchoring point is not stable. The ending does not truly explain the dreams but further expands the gap between dream and reality. The more the player attempts to reduce all images to a complete psychological narrative, the more they discover that many scenes, characters, and events cannot be fully integrated into this interpretive framework.



Figure 7. Kikiyama, *Yume Nikki*, 2004. Screenshot of the Uboa event in Poniko's House. Source:

Yume Wiki, "Yume Nikki:Uboa," accessed May 15, 2026.

Therefore, player identification in *Yume Nikki* always remains suspended between attraction and interruption. On the one hand, Madotsuki's silent body, simple controls, and enclosed room provide the player with a mirror position that can be occupied. On the other hand, the game's sudden images, inexplicable scenes, strange characters, and abrupt spatial transitions continually disrupt the player's mastery of this position. The Uboa event is the most typical example. The player initially assumes that they are simply acting within an NPC's room, a space that can be explored, organized, and understood. Yet Uboa's sudden appearance interrupts this agency. It does not clearly serve the narrative, nor does it provide a predictable reward

or explanation. Instead, it erupts into the player's experience in a sudden, frightening, and unintegrable manner. At this moment, the player is no longer simply the subject controlling Madotsuki, but becomes the object captured and looked at by the image.

From this perspective, the mirror structure of Yume Nikki is not a stable mechanism of character identification, but a mechanism of identification that continually fails. Madotsuki's body is both the medium through which the player enters the dream and the anchor of the player's desire to interpret. Yet this anchor is always shaken by the inexplicability of the dream images. After summoning the player into a narcissistic identification, the game then continually breaks this identification through sudden events, spatial ruptures, and the withdrawal of meaning. In other words, Yume Nikki does not allow the player to safely occupy the complete subject in the mirror and forces the player to experience the fragility of this completeness itself. What it reveals is not "I become whole through the character," but "the more I try to become whole through the character, the more I am forced to confront the emptiness of this position."

Conclusion

Therefore, the uniqueness of Yume Nikki does not lie in the fact that it conceals a deep truth waiting to be uncovered, but in the way it repeatedly makes the player experience the possibility that this so-called deep truth may itself be an illusion produced by desire. The story of Zeuxis and Parrhasius offers an appropriate

comparison that the grapes painted by Zeuxis deceived the birds, while the curtain painted by Parrhasius deceived Zeuxis himself. The former painting simulated reality through a realistic appearance, whereas the latter made the viewer believe that there was something more real behind the appearance, waiting to be revealed.

In this sense, Yume Nikki is closer to Parrhasius's curtain. Its dream images, silent protagonist, useless Effects, fragmented spaces, and absence of the author are not external coverings that conceal a complete narrative. On the contrary, they are the core reality of the game itself. Borrowing Žižek's interpretation of Lacan, this "veil" does not cover a deeper substance, but constitutes the Real itself: it marks the gap where meaning can never be fully possessed, and it becomes the focal point around which desire continues to circulate.

The player continues to explore, interpret, and look back not because the game will eventually provide a deitnswer, but because the game makes the player believe that the answer seems to lie just behind the surface. Yet when the player tries to lift this curtain, what they encounter is not a hidden truth, but nothing at all. Yume Nikki does not use appearance to conceal reality, but defines reality through appearance, does not satisfy the player's desire for interpretation, but forces the player to confront the void around which desire itself is organized.

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