

# Game Narrative Review

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**Game Title:** *Nine Sols*  
**Platform:** Windows, macOS, Switch, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Series X/S  
**Genre:** 2D Action-Platformer Metroidvania  
**Release Date:** May 29, 2024 (initial worldwide release)  
**Developer:** Red Candle Games  
**Publisher:** Red Candle Games  
**Creative Director:** Shih-Wei Yang (Vincent)  
**Script Writers:** Chuan-Hsiang Dang, Shih-Wei Yang (Vincent), Smiler Hsu, Doy Chiang  
**Narrative Designers:** Shih-Wei Yang (Vincent), Chuan-Hsiang Dang, Smiler Hsu, Hans Chen, Pege Ho, Tata Cheong

## Overview

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Every flame must one day be extinguished. Even the sun, that which nourishes all life and outshines all in its brilliance, must also fade out. This is a truth the Solarians refuse to bow down to when faced with their species' twilight at the hands of the deadly Tianhuo Virus. In a desperate attempt to extend their longevity, many Solarians abandon their home planet of Penglai and set off to space in New Kunlun, where they remain in a stasis under the leadership and care of the Tiandao Council - the ten "Sols" tasked with developing a cure for the Tianhuo Virus - awaiting a day when they may awaken from the Eternal Cauldron and finally be freed from the Tianhuo Virus. But still, a cure remains out of reach; the Solarians' flame only remains flickering at the cost of the Apemen, whom they treat as sacrificial livestock. As the years pass and the Council continue their research, our soon-to-be protagonist Yi fails to find a light at the end of the tunnel. Instead of salvation, he uncovers how the Tianhuo Virus came to be and finds himself sentenced to death by his mentor, Eigong.

500 years go by and Yi is revitalized by the Fusang Roots, hellbent on revenge. His journey to slay his former allies and seize control of the Eternal Cauldron makes up the sprawling, narrative-driven Metroidvania game known as *Nine Sols*. As they explore the entirety of New Kunlun and befriend Apemen, robots, and Solarians alike, players come to learn and appreciate the game's core as a "Taopunk" game. It ingeniously embeds Taoist beliefs, Chinese mythos, and cyberpunk themes and aesthetics together to tell an evocative tale about how power can corrupt even the most well-meaning people, the meaning of progress when it is at the horrific expense of others, the consequences of stagnation in opposition to progress, and most especially, the peace in accepting death as an inevitable but natural part of what makes life meaningful. For when all is said and done...

*"Life and death are one ... As long as we have lived, the Tao will remember everything."*  
-- Heng

## Characters

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### Yi & His Major Allies

**Yi (羿)** - The protagonist of *Nine Sols*, Yi is a Solarian and former member of the Ten Sols intent on getting revenge after he unearthed the truth behind the Tianhuo virus and was subsequently betrayed by his former allies for it. While stubbornly prideful about his work as a Fangshi, Yi's cold heart slowly melts over the course of the story. He comes to recognize that failure and change are a natural part of living; that sometimes, it is best to yield and let nature take its course - to embrace and love what you already have - than resist and destroy all that is dear to you in the first place.

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**Shuanshuan (軒軒)** - An orphaned young Apeman from Peach Blossom Village with a curious mind and pure heart. He nurses Yi back to health after Eigong nearly kills him. Though set to be sacrificed in the Solarian ceremony, Yi returns the favor and saves Shuanshuan, prompting the boy to remain near Yi at the Four Seasons Pavilion. When visiting the pavilion, Yi gifts Shuanshuan various artifacts, and Shuanshuan wholeheartedly supports Yi on his quest. Through their genuine brotherly relationship, Shuanshuan, more than anyone, softens Yi's heart and makes him realize the error of his ways-- that blindly clinging to vengeance would not bring him the time and peace stolen from him by Eigong.

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**Kuafu (夸父)** - A Solarian and member of the Nine Sols. Kuafu is a skilled craftsman who joined the Council in hopes of reviving the traditional trades dying out in his hometown. Over time, he becomes good friends with Y but becomes embroiled in Eigong's deception, believing it to be a misunderstanding between the two. Wrought by guilt over his best friend's death, Kuafu awakens 500 years later and quickly switches sides to atone for his previous inaction, once again becoming one of Yi's closest allies. In the true ending, Kuafu is the only remaining Solarian, tasked with helping the Apemen rebuild their future on the Pale Blue Planet.

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### The Nine Sols

**In General** - Also known as the Tiandao Council. The Nine Sols - previously Ten with Yi - are the primary antagonistic group of the game. Their group serves as the rulers of New Kunlun, responsible for managing various affairs and industries on the planet and most responsible for finding a cure to the Tianhuo Virus plaguing Solarians. To this end, they developed the Eternal Cauldron project and oppressed the Apemen at Yi's behest. In the present story, the Nine Sols are the target of Yi's vengeance; he is intent on killing them to take their Sol Seals and regain control of his Eternal Cauldron.

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**Eigong (易公)** - Yi's (former) mentor and *Nine Sols*' final boss. As a futurist research scientist pursuing eternal life for the Solarians, her experiments resulted in the creation of the Tianhuo Virus. Her attempts at curing the virus further mutated Solarians, though her treatments also achieved her lifelong goal of granting the Solarians immortality. So consumed by her desire to grant the Solarians eternal life and inability to accept death as a natural part of life, she comes to view their mutated forms as a blessing and will stop at nothing to go against the fundamental nature of the world by becoming the Solarians' immortal god.

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### Other Significant Characters

**Heng (恆)** - Yi's little sister with whom he had a close bond. Compared to Yi's scientific and logical approach to life, Heng was immensely spiritual and had a strong connection with the Fusang Root. Her connection to the Roots revives Yi from the dead after an accident and gives him regenerative abilities. However, the differences in their beliefs - establishing the two as foils - came to a head in their final discussion, causing them to part ways on poor terms. Nonetheless, Heng never held it against Yi and continued to send him messages until she naturally passed away on Penglai, rejoining the earth as a follower of the Tao.

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**Lear (李耳)** - The founder of the Fangshi Guild and creator of Taoism in *Nine Sols*. He is a mysterious figure that Yi encounters each time he enters the Root Node, serving as a mentor figure and foil to Yi. He is someone who completely rejected technology and science in fear of the destructive power it would have on civilization through his Inaction Declaration. His condemnation of science pervades Solarian society, resulting in a peaceful but stagnant culture filled with individuals who sought science out due to its forbidden nature; that in turn caused Solarians like Yi and Eigong to pursue progress without considering the consequences it would have on the people and world around them.

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## Breakdown

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### *Nine Sol's Narrative Structure*

Before delving into the intricacies of *Nine Sols*' narrative, it is essential to establish that the game is created by Taiwanese developers intent on “blend[ing] religious and thematic East Asian references with modern aspects” into their works and how that influences the approach they take with their stories (Oh). From its explicit elements to its very foundation, *Nine Sols* is a game dripping with influence from the culture it comes from. One prominent example of this is through the game's use of a traditional storytelling structure known as *Qi-Cheng-Zhuan-Jie* (起承轉結).

This story structure consists of four acts in which the first act (*qi*) is “the opening or beginning” that introduces the audience to the narrative's world, characters, and story; the second act (*cheng*) “continues or joins the opening to the next stage” as a development and expansion of all that is introduced at the start; the third act (*zhuan*) “is the transition or turning point” that takes the story in an unexpected yet natural direction; and the final act (*jie*) “is the summary or conclusion” that ties together all of the thematic elements of the story in a cohesive manner (Zhang 314). When compared to three-act structures, the four-act structure places less emphasis on the conflict of the story and how the characters fight against it and more on the acclimation and acceptance of their struggles--something that permeates the story and design present in *Nine Sols*.

Below is a breakdown of *Nine Sols*' narrative (with the true ending) in the four acts of *Qi-Cheng-Zhuan-Jie* and how the game weaves narratives within narratives to create a strong foundation for its expansive world through fractal storytelling.

#### Act 1: Opening

After being betrayed by Eigong, Yi awakens to the sound of Shuanshuan's flute, mistaking his playing for Heng's. While staying at Peach Blossom village, he familiarizes himself with the Apemen, the Harvest Prayer Ceremony, their beliefs of the Solarians as divine gods, and Shuanshuan before setting off to New Kunlun to enact his revenge against the Tiandao Council for

their treachery. Additional stories are introduced within the opening.

The Opening in 4 Acts	
Introduction	Yi is taken in by Shuanshuan and begins to live with the orphaned boy at Peach Blossom Village.
Development	Over the course of his stay at the village, Yi and Shuanshuan develop an attachment to one another. At the same time, Shuanshuan is chosen to go live with the gods in the upcoming Harvest Prayer ceremony.
Turning Point	The Harvest Prayer ceremony is revealed to be a sacrificial ceremony in which the chosen Apemen have their brains harvested by the Solarians.
Conclusion	Before Shuanshuan is actually sacrificed, Yi's emotions get the better of him, and he saves Shuanshuan. His actions throw off Abacus' calculations and awaken the Nine Sols, increasing the danger in his plot for revenge going forward.

Heng's Story	
Introduction	After nearly being killed by Eigong, Yi stirs awake at the sound of a flute. He mistakes it for Heng's performance, establishing Heng as someone immensely important to Yi.

## Act 2: Development

Yi breaks into each of the Sols' districts and confronts them for their Sol Seals. Along the way, he gains other allies, forms close bonds with them, and hosts them at the Four Seasons Pavilion. Yi continues to deepen his bond with Shuanshuan and reminisces about his life with Heng on Penglai. Many of his allies and enemies have their own unique stories, each divisible into their own set of acts. While Yi is blinded by his desire for revenge during the first half of the story and immediately resorting to violence against the Sols, he comes to recognize that the situation is far more complicated than the black-and-white he saw it as. Barring Eigong, he empathizes with the remaining Sols and avoids fighting them, but to little avail. A few of many examples of *Nine Sols'* fractal storytelling are also listed below:

Lady Ethereal's Story	
Introduction	Abacus informs Yi that there is a strange signal at the Cortex Center, prompting Yi to investigate it. Upon arriving at the center, Yi is inadvertently dragged into an alternate dimension, where he encounters a seemingly amnesiac Lady Ethereal suggesting he join "them" in the hot springs. But the only two people around are Yi and Lady Ethereal.
Development	Yi realizes that he is in Lady Ethereal's Soulscape and is experiencing her dream. However, while trying to escape, he discovers that he is trapped in a loop. With every loop, he learns more about the research Lady Ethereal did

for the Soulscape project and how her errors resulted in the death of her daughter and colleagues. She felt pressured to cover up her horrific failures and inform the Council that the Soulscape project was ready for deployment.

**The Soulscape’s Level Design in Multiple Narrative Sections**

**Introduction** The player’s Mystic Nymph is taken away from them. When first platforming through Lady Ethereal’s Soulscape, the player is introduced to the area’s unique mechanic: dark void-like glitches that expand and reveal platforms previously unseen to the player for a brief span of time before deflating and hiding the platforms again. At set intervals, the glitches unveil the darkness looming within Lady Ethereal’s idyllic dream.

**Development** The Soulscape’s platforming grows progressively more challenging as it begins to incorporate and combine the Soulscape’s unique mechanic with mechanics previously utilized through the game: wall-climbing, stage hazards, and parrying off of enemies and projectiles. Furthermore, they discover mechanisms capable of activating the glitches on command and that, within the Soulscape’s dark glitches, the ghoul-like enemies revert to harmless crying cat-like creatures, hinting at Lady Ethereal’s guilt-ridden state as Yi further learns of her distress.

**Turning Point** Consumed by an overwhelming sense of guilt and self-loathing, Lady Ethereal is convinced that she is a deceptive murderer, ensnaring innocents in her Soulscape experiments. Though she asks Yi to punish her, Lady Ethereal feels it is not enough and completely loses her sanity. She banishes Yi from her Soulscape.

**The Soulscape’s Level Design in Multiple Narrative Sections**

**Turning Point** After the extent of Lady Ethereal’s torment is unveiled, the player’s Mystic Nymph is freed and acts as a guide during the Soulscape’s final platforming section. The Nymph emits an area that reveals the void-like glitches to the player and serves as the section’s primary source of glitches. As a result, the player must closely follow the Nymph’s erratic pathing while platforming to successfully navigate through the Soulscape’s final challenge.

**Conclusion** The player successfully completes the Soulscape’s platforming challenges and is expelled from Lady Ethereal’s Soulscape.

Conclusion	In spite of the danger, Yi resolves to re-enter Lady Ethereal's Soulscape and snap her out of it. Through the ensuing battle and listening to her plights, Yi helps Lady Ethereal come to terms with her sins and finally move on in peace.
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### Ji's Story

Introduction	While traversing through New Kunlun, Yi encounters an unnamed child astrologer skilled in divination.
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Development	The astrologer appears in various, high-security locations throughout New Kunlun and tells Yi about secrets and memories of the ancient past unknown to all else. He also occasionally tells Yi his fortune - divinations that he has absolute confidence in - and offers him advice on his journey for vengeance, eventually causing Yi to realize that the astrologer has been hiding his identity from the start and is someone Yi should be familiar with.
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Turning Point	<p>After entering the Grotto of Scriptures, Yi realizes that the astrologer's true identity is the Nine Sols Ji.</p> <table> <tr> <th colspan="2">The Turning Point in Multiple Sections</th></tr> <tr> <td>Introduction</td><td>Yi is introduced to Ji's true identity as one of the Nine Sols and why Ji has been approaching him constantly: because Yi is someone who shines so brightly. He further reveals that he is an immortal ancient Solarian.</td></tr> <tr> <td>Development</td><td>While Yi feels that Ji's immortality is a blessing, Ji instead believes it to be a curse, dooming him to an eternal life of loneliness-- one he lacks the courage to end himself. Because he is of the ancient Kunlun tribe, Yi is reluctant to fight Ji and offers Ji mercy in exchange for his Sol Seal.</td></tr> <tr> <td>Turning Point</td><td>Ji states that it is impossible for the two of them to avoid battle as Ji's divinations decree that the one destined to kill Yi is Ji himself, provoking Yi into battle.</td></tr> </table>	The Turning Point in Multiple Sections		Introduction	Yi is introduced to Ji's true identity as one of the Nine Sols and why Ji has been approaching him constantly: because Yi is someone who shines so brightly. He further reveals that he is an immortal ancient Solarian.	Development	While Yi feels that Ji's immortality is a blessing, Ji instead believes it to be a curse, dooming him to an eternal life of loneliness-- one he lacks the courage to end himself. Because he is of the ancient Kunlun tribe, Yi is reluctant to fight Ji and offers Ji mercy in exchange for his Sol Seal.	Turning Point	Ji states that it is impossible for the two of them to avoid battle as Ji's divinations decree that the one destined to kill Yi is Ji himself, provoking Yi into battle.
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Conclusion	Yi bests Ji, mortally wounding him. He tells Ji that his divination was incorrect, but Ji corrects him. Ji knew all along that Yi would kill him; he simply lied because he knew Yi wouldn't have the heart to take his life. Finally freed from his immortality, Ji peacefully passes on without regrets.
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### Heng's Story (cont.)

Development	As Yi journeys through New Kunlun and seizes the Sols' Seals, he begins receiving messages from Heng, sent from Penglai. With each message, he relives memories of his childhood and recalls his closeness with Heng, whom he progressively grew to hold different beliefs from.
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### Act 3: Turning Point

As Yi's quest for vengeance nears the end, the player discovers that Yi was betrayed by Eigong because he learned that Eigong was the one responsible for creating the Tianhuo Virus; her experiments resulted in the deaths of many Solarians, his parents, and eventually, Heng. Yi's journey through the Research Institute also reveals that the one responsible for creating the Eternal Cauldron and suggesting that they use the Apemen as livestock was Yi. Yi's current journey is not just of vengeance but also atonement for his sins. He comes to recognize that blindly grouping all of the Sols with one another was merely a projection of his own self-loathing and grief over losing Heng. He, of all people, was in no position to judge and execute them as the mastermind of the human harvesting project... but that none of them were necessarily to blame for all that transpired. Unfortunately, Eigong ambushes Yi and steals the Sol Seals, seizing the Eternal Cauldron in hopes of mutating all Solarians into immortality.

#### Heng's Story (cont.)

Turning Point	Despite the siblings' closeness, Yi failed to understand and respect Heng's decisions, causing him to part with Heng in bitterness. When he receives her final message from Penglai, he finally sobers up and expresses the grief and regret weighing in his heart. He was never able to make good on his promise of coming back to her because of Eigong and practically disowned her out of an intolerance towards her choices-- an intolerance she did not exhibit towards his own beliefs. By the time he has received her messages, Heng has already passed on.
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### Act 4: Resolution

Yi resolves to save the Apemen and enlists Kuafu's help in creating a weapon to defeat Eigong and have him pilot a ship to return the Apemen to their home planet. He promises Shuanshuan to join them on the Pale Blue Planet after he finishes what he's started. Though Yi defeats Eigong in battle, he is unable to stop her from infecting the Solarians with the mutation serum. To ensure that the Apemen can live on in peace, Yi apologizes to Shuanshuan for breaking his promise and sacrifices himself to destroy New Kunlun, finally freeing the Apemen from the Solarians.

#### Heng's Story (cont.)

Conclusion	Yi comes to accept the natural cycle of life and death, understanding the beliefs that Heng held in his final sacrifice to save the Apemen and give them back their future. In death, he reunites with Heng, finally fulfilling his promise to come back for her.
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### Natural Integration of Cultural Inspiration into World and Lore

Many cyberpunk settings draw upon Asian aesthetics and common "orientalist cliches ... rooted in the idea that the presence of Asians [is] somehow polluting white America" and "reinforces the notion of otherness" that stands in "stark contrast to [Asian America's] real-life counterparts" (Yang G.). The use of Chinese and Japanese culture in these settings are not typically positive or authentic. Rather, they are employed for aesthetic flavoring and rarely go further than as shorthands

for Yellow Perilist tropes: representatives of western fears that the “East” may one day dominate them. Cyberpunk stories that portray Sinosphere cultures on a deeper level - particularly those released to an international audience - are as unlikely as an iron tree blooming. *Nine Sols* does heavily “[meld] sci-fi elements with [Chinese] mythology” and culture into the unique setting of New Kunlun and Penglai, but differentiates its environmental storytelling from other cyberpunk settings by borrowing from traditional culture over contemporary diaspora culture in California (“Nine Sols”). As an example, the environment’s visuals take cues from the ethereal landscapes commonly found in *guo hua* (国画) and historical architecture; then, the Root Nodes bear a striking resemblance to lotuses - a flower emblematic of rebirth - linking their appearance into their gameplay and narrative function as Yi’s respawn point. Each and every visual element displays how *Nine Sols* doesn’t hesitate to wear its cultural inspirations on its sleeve, proudly showcasing them as a part of the game’s appeal. But where many cyberpunk settings simply use Asian cultures as an aesthetic, *Nine Sols* avoids the pitfalls of techno-orientalism by employing several allusions and direct cultural references in its tale.

Lady Ethereal, for instance, is stated by the developers to be “based on ‘Zhuangzi and the butterfly dream’” (qtd. and tld. by Contributors to NineSols). The Butterfly Dream in *Zhuangzi* details a man by the name of Zhuang Zhou, dreaming that he was a butterfly, unaware of his life as Zhuang Zhou. However, upon waking up, he began to wonder whether he was actually Zhuang Zhou or if he was a butterfly dreaming that he was Zhuang Zhou. This, coupled with the Chinese idiom (作茧自缚) of spinning a cocoon around yourself and trapping yourself in your own plans, perfectly ties into Lady Ethereal’s character concept as the creator of the Soulscape, a device that caused its users’ perception of reality and dreams to blur, and the cocoons and butterflies used in the environmental storytelling of her boss fight. Distracted that her Soulscapes worked so perfectly - to the extent that they mentally destroyed her daughter and colleagues with a perfect dream they could not bear to wake up from - Lady Ethereal’s own sanity came to deteriorate as Eigong ultimately shackled her within her own Soulscape and the guilt of her sins tortured her over the years.

Another notable example lies in the protagonist Yi and his sister Heng, who are modeled after the legendary archer Hou Yi and his wife Chang’e. The mythological Hou Yi’s “most fabled exploit [is when] he shot down nine of the ten suns when they appeared in the sky together and threatened to scorch the Earth ... sav[ing] the people ... from calamity;” however, some versions of the story make him out to be a reckless hunter who “set himself up as ruler ... and changed the laws of the land ... thus bringing grief to the entire nation.” (Masako). *Nine Sols*’ Yi follows a similar tale, setting him up as a “tyrant” who wrought tragedy and destruction on the Apemen with his inhumane Eternal Cauldron project. He later comes to turn his bow and arrow towards the nine “suns” or Sols tormenting the Apemen, liberating their people from bearing the burden of the Solarians’ lives. In comparison to Yi’s story closely resembling Hou Yi’s, Yi and Heng’s story is an inversion of their original tale. Chang’e is stated to be the one who gains immortality and flees to the moon, leaving Hou Yi heartbroken in solitude. But here, it is Yi who pursues immortality at the “sun” of New Kunlun and sentences Heng to solitude in her final years of life.

Even the two’s narrative foils - twin Sols Fuxi and Nuwa - carry overt references to the mythological figures of the same names with Nuwa’s snake-based attacks in gameplay and subtle cultural references in the form of Nuwa’s feet being bound to emphasize her status as both someone of the gentry class and as an actress (this completely destroys her ability to walk-- something perfectly showcased in the game’s visual storytelling as she relies on a floating device to move and, once she falls from it, resorts to desperately crawling around); their Sol Seals and Vital Sanctums referencing *The Peony Pavilion* by Tang Xianzu to highlight the romantic love the two had for each



other; and the two's visuals in the credits resembling the bows exchanged during Chinese wedding ceremonies.

Yet, despite the depth in *Nine Sols*' usage of cultural elements, the game never fully calls attention to these details nor attempts to educate the player on what exactly these cultural aspects are. This may cause players from the international audience to feel lost and confused by the unfamiliar setting, but is this not a given for any story featuring a fictional world or setting? Interactive narratives set in fictional worlds often employ worldbuilding and lore as a part of their design to better immerse the players in the setting. This is because expositing information can break the audience's immersion when the information being expositing is in service of the audience rather than the characters. The result, then, is weaker and less engaging storytelling.

*Nine Sols* avoids this by following in the footsteps of other stories before it. It utilizes the presentation of its worldbuilding and lore to allow these cultural elements to naturally exist as something familiar to the characters, even if it is unfamiliar to the audience. Though players may miss many of the game's cultural details, this is similar to how lore descriptions and other storytelling methods in games tend to be optional to and do not detract from the player experience. Consequently, *Nine Sols* can better focus on delivering narrative elements with a high or certain degree of certainty to the player experience and expand upon it through various techniques such as lore, environmental and visual storytelling, and optional interactions. This conveys to players the feeling of a deeper world-- all while granting them the agency to explore the game's lofty yet futuristic worldscape. As for those who do catch onto these cultural elements? They may grasp onto them like a treasure they uncovered from the depths of the earth, marveling and appreciating its beauty all the more.

That is not to say that *Nine Sols* lacks unabashed transparency in its integration of cultural inspirations as a direct part of its narrative, however. After all, amidst all of the developers' goals when creating the game, the most important of these would be their desire to "[b]uild a stylish Taopunk world" where the seemingly disharmonious elements of Taoism and cyberpunk could exist as one ("Nine Sols").

### **The "Tao" in *Nine Sols*' Taopunk:**

In preparation for a more extensive analysis of how *Nine Sols* incorporates Taoism into its narrative, it is essential to first establish a basic understanding of what Taoism is. Taoism - also romanized as Daoism - "enables people to realize that ... the only human actions which ultimately make sense are those which are in accord with the flow of Nature" and "rejects human ideas or standards which might lead to an overly assertive mode of behavior or too strong a commitment to the achievement of worldly goals" through a "doctrine of wu-wei or non-action" (Bloom). Serving as both a philosophy and religion, Taoist beliefs approach life from a rather nihilistic but simple standpoint: because humanity is merely a small cog in the universe's grand scheme - a firefly barely visible against the brilliance of the universe - it is best to embrace what the world already has to offer and avoid disrupting the natural order; the tides of change will inevitably sweep them away, regardless of whether they are prepared for it or not. Taoism also places a strong emphasis on achieving balance and harmony in all aspects of life.

These core beliefs are the very heart to *Nine Sols*' story. Should anyone attempt to break *Nine Sols* away from its Taoist foundation - like the connected threads of broken lotus roots - traces of its influence will always remain.

### **All Power Tends to Corrupt; There is no Right nor Wrong**

The first of these themes is well-represented by a quote from Lord Acton's letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton: "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority." As a member of the political elite during the Victorian era, Lord Acton was privy to the heinous acts his fellow authoritative figures committed in order to retain a tight grasp on the power they had over the people. He recognized that power is something that is incapable of existing without people; it is a social and cultural construct most employed by those willing to do whatever it takes to get to the top. But even among people who achieve power with good intentions, they will inevitably find it impossible to remain good as their power inherently puts them in a position where they are forcing people to bend to their will. This triggers the inevitable degeneration to tyranny.

Taoism argues similarly, rhetorically asking people whether they "can... love people and lead them without imposing [their own] will" and states that "[v]iolence, even well intentioned, always rebounds upon oneself" (Laozi). Because ruling is so tied to the notion of power and is shackled by the ruler's commitment to achieve worldly goals, it is often not possible to avoid drastic consequences born from the necessary meticulous plans and rules for governance. One way or another, absolute power and control will never lead to good, even in the hands of a good person, for people and the universe at large will always remain out of their control.

In *Nine Sols*, the corrosive properties of power are most present in Lear - *Nine Sols*' equivalent to Laozi, the legendary founder of Taoism - who serves as a mentor to Yi throughout the game. In his final encounter before returning to the Great Tao, he presents Yi with his past: Lear rallied with three sages to develop weaponry and save the Solarians during the Turbulent Era. Though they succeeded in their conquest, they were unable to bring peace to the land. In their efforts to save their people, they had opened Pandora's box and created weapons of mass destruction. Further still, as the new leaders of the Solarians, the sages began to harbor wicked thoughts and grew drunk on their power, forcing Lear to execute his former allies and enact a Declaration of Inaction in which all "harmful" sciences would be sealed away and science as a whole would be shunned. In an attempt to maintain the peace he and his allies fought so hard to achieve, Lear suffocated any future attempts at progress and subjected the Solarians to what he believed to be just. He became the new demon terrorizing his people.

But, is it just Lear who is like this? As Lear said: "*Why couldn't it be [Yi]?*"

After all, Yi alongside the other Sols, had hoped to develop a cure to the Tianhuo Virus blighting the lands. Equipped with their own specialties and strengths, they tirelessly answered their people's pleas as the effective rulers of Penglai. Yet, as the years passed, a cure remained far out of reach. In a desperate bid to buy time for the Solarians, they abandoned their homeland and, at Yi's proposal, opted to put their people in a stasis through the Eternal Cauldron project. But the further they went along with these plans, the more they abandoned their morals and ethics to uphold their reputation. As he acts as Lear's protege throughout the course of the game, Yi learns Lear's destructive techniques and eliminates every Sol in his path-- a perfect reflection of Lear's path. With Lear reuniting with the Great Tao and Eigong's death, Yi would then be the only force of power remaining. Just as Lear had done before him, Yi came to recognize exactly what it was that he must do in the true ending: to preserve the peace and restore natural order to the Apemen's future, he could not remain. Not when he was a figure of absolute power, incapable of being slain by ordinary means and more than capable of slipping into tyranny, given his prior cruelty.

Neither Lear nor Yi had malicious intent; both only had their people's best interests at heart. Yet...

*"Amidst this pitch-black sky, we seek a sun that can illuminate the entire universe.  
... But at what cost? What have we become?"*

-- Lear

They could not avoid becoming the villains of their stories; the source of all the disharmony and dysfunction in the world. By the end of it all, it matters not whether they had intended good or bad, right or wrong. Only their actions and consequences remain, and those will be judged - perhaps even condemned - by those who come after them.

### **Progress vs Inaction & The Necessity of Both in Balance**

From head to toe with her martial robes and saber in hand, Eigong carries the impression of a dignified warrior, intent on brute-forcing her way through every obstacle that stands in her path. She is the embodiment of progress at all costs. Her boss fight is particularly indicative of her methods; amidst the unrelenting onslaught of slash attacks and detonating talismans, Yi scarcely has room to breathe and launch his own attacks. These attacks only continue ramping up in intensity and scale with every phase, growing more and more desperate as Yi begins to overpower her. Be that as it may, Yi is not Eigong's greatest obstacle to overcome with "progress."

What Eigong rampages against most as an "issue" to be solved is mortality. Funded by the Feng clan - who tightly clung onto power in Penglai and wished to overcome death to maintain said power and wealth over the people - Eigong tirelessly searched for a way to defeat the inevitability of death. However, her work soon came to devastate the Solarians through the unintentional creation of the Tianhuo Virus, nearly wiping out her species. But, even knowing just how much her people have paid for the sake of her research, Eigong never relented in her pursuit for the eternal and comes to view her attempted cure's mutations - a twisted, rotting form in which the Solarians' autonomy and sentience are stripped away from them - as a blessing. This development strongly resembles the current status of our own capitalistic society's "progress": the wealthy corporations and government officials are heavily focused on preserving their own authority, funneling resources into solving "problems" that do not need solving. Their insistence on progress and development in fields such as generative AI or advanced military equipment all come at the cost of those lower in the social hierarchy. Be it the loss of people's livelihoods (both financially and physically), the stifling of creativity and self-expression in the face of power and profit, or the catastrophic waste inflicted on the planet, the message is evident: for those in power, just about anything is worth the cost of self-interest, thinly disguised under the veneer of advancing society.

*Nine Sols'* cutscenes centered around Yi's backstory and how he ended up the way he is at the beginning of the game paint him in a similar light to Eigong. Even prior to becoming her most staunch supporter and pupil, Yi had always rejected the natural order and vehemently believed in the power of science. Though his own experiments essentially cost him his life and put Heng in grave danger, he only buried himself deeper into his work and further strengthened his disdain for the spiritual. By the time the player steps into Yi's shoes, he has all but disowned his sister for their differences in beliefs and muddled his heart in darkness. For the one responsible for the bloodied extension of life granted to the Solarian and grew blind to the suffering he drowned everyone in was none other than Yi. In his attempts to buy time for a cure to the Tianhuo and delay the Solarians' end, the Pale Blue Planet was intentionally frozen over, the Apemen have been reduced to livestock as lambs to the slaughter and, with each passing year, more Solarians succumb to their deaths in the

Eternal Cauldron. If not death, then perhaps, a fate worse than it, as it was for Lady Ethereal - who was tortured by a hellish landscape born from her own regrets and guilt - or the Mutants, who withstand eternity but can do nothing but act on their most primal instincts of survival. Their lives are hollow and devoid of purpose as they wait for a cure that will not come.

To both Yi and Eigong...

*"Truth and lies mean[t] nothing compared to a Solarian's life ... What could be more important than staying alive? Without life, we all return to nothingness."*

-- Eigong

Unfortunately, it is their attempts at playing god and toying with people's fates that cements the Solarians' ends.

*"Trying to control the future is like trying to take the master carpenter's place. When you handle the master carpenter's tools, chances are that you'll cut your hand."*

-- Laozi (tld. by Mitchell)

How exactly did Yi and Eigong come to believe that survival and progress trumps all? That science is everything when their innovations came at such an astronomically steep price?

The answer lies in Lear, who situated himself on the opposite end of the spectrum. Where Yi and Eigong asserted that progress was everything, Lear came to scorn science after the destruction he and the Three Sages bred during the Turbulent era. Unwilling to see a repeat of that same catastrophe, Lear used his position of power to enact the Inaction Declaration. His policies resulted in an era of peace known as the Origin Era, but it was one akin to stagnant water. With the disbandment of the Fangshi Guild, the Origin Era quickly became characterized by its suppression and confiscation of technology and science. Nothing stirred. Nothing changed. In shunning science and warping it into that of the taboo - all in a desperate bid to improve his people's societal wisdom and consciousness - he inadvertently severed the Solarians' ability to understand the dangers associated with science. They became reliant on the people in power and ignorant to their surroundings, incapable of questioning whether their actions are right or wrong without someone to judge them--just as the Apemen later become under the Solarians' control. But where the Apemen and Solarians differ are their positions of power: the Solarians, though scientifically illiterate, had the power and resources to pursue the forbidden temptations of science. This then led to the creation of the underground insurgent organization - the Tiandao Council - who took matters into their own hands and recklessly pursued scientific breakthroughs unchecked.

*"We are Sols. Outshining all species, never to be extinguished. Leeching off bygone glory to fuel our brilliance. We are survivors. Our feverish flames have failed to forge hope, inflicting blistering pain with each searing embrace."*

-- the Tiandao Council

A single god-cast stone from the Council was enough to disturb the Origin Era's tranquility and send fatal ripples through Solarian society. Though Lear did what he believed to be best, he unwittingly made his people vulnerable and gave the Council the perfect opportunity to monopolize Solarian authority. The peace he created was a fragile, brittle thing.

Throughout the course of *Nine Sols'* narrative, Lear and Eigong's extremities are recognized as detrimental to their people. Both created societies mired by decadence with consequences that spiraled far beyond what any of them could have anticipated. Yi eventually diverts from both of their views because of his interactions with the spiritually-attuned and naively innocent Apemen. Shuanshuan, most especially, represents the heart and morality missing from Lear and Eigong's perspectives. When gifted weaponry by Yi to learn to defend himself, the young boy recognizes its potential as a tool but does not see a need to use it to harm others. He instead proposes that he use the blade to trim the bushes and flowers in the Pavilion. Shuanshuan, like Yi, is curious and clever; he knows just how beneficial and life-changing technology can be. But because he understands the power behind these technological advancements, he also recognizes that there is a line that should not be crossed. No matter how groundbreaking the innovation may be, people's lives are too invaluable to throw away for the sake of progress.

In a vacuum, science and wariness of its harms as a result of spirituality are not inherently wrong. But they must be balanced alongside one another and made inseparable in their practices. Above all, science is born of people's love and curiosity towards all that is natural in the cosmos, driven by their desire to grasp what makes the universe just the way it is and why. Understanding how to approach it and recognizing the gravity that comes with its practice is necessary to avoid a decadent society, drunk on its own delusions and blatant disregard for reality. Only in balance - in recognizing that science and spirituality are intertwined - can people set sail for the stars in pursuit of all that the universe has to offer.

### **To Be at Peace with the Inevitability of Death**

Death is one of the universe's few immutable truths-- something that reigns supreme and ever unchanging, no matter how desperately people rage against it. Be it Eigong's attempts to conquer death, Yanlao's fear of passing into the next life, Nuwa's unwillingness to accept that her brother is gone, or Ji's longing for his never-ending life to end, the acceptance or rejection of death as a fact of life firmly plants itself in the heart of *Nine Sols'* story; as the crux of Yi and Heng's interpersonal final conflict and a significant driver for Yi's actions throughout the game.

When the Tianhuo Virus began to ravage Penglai at an alarming rate, many Solarians grew fearful for their life and sought to escape the inevitable. They turned to the Tiandao Council for a scientific solution to death, hoping that, somehow, they would be able to survive, even if it meant languishing away in an artificial purgatory that would only delay their fate. Yi is no different from many Solarians in this regard, given that he is the prime architect behind the Eternal Cauldron. Unwilling to idly sit by and watch the Tianhuo Virus snatch the life out of his people, Yi insists that "Solarians are more resilient than you think. If we're united under one cause, nothing can destroy us. We *will* persevere" and fight against death. He and the other Sols did everything in their power to resist death. But their centuries of research increasingly revealed that there simply is no cure to the Tianhuo Virus, and the cost of maintaining the Eternal Cauldron grows heavier with time. Additional in-game logs reveal that it is an inseparable part of what grants their kind sentience; to remove it is to lose what makes them whole. If not the loss of their sentience through the removal of the virus, then it is the loss of their very beings with Eigong's mutation serum or the deprivation of life itself in the Eternal Cauldron.

Heng, however, refused to join Yi and the other Solarians on New Kunlun and instead chose to spend her final days on Penglai, experiencing what life still had to offer. Though she was the one to bury many of her people, Heng never grew to reject the idea of death. On the contrary, she viewed the Tianhuo flowers blooming after a Solarian passes as a sign that "everyone's returning to their

original colors after their suffering ends;” that, the “Tianhuo is just the transition. It’s not the end.” That is not to say that Heng yearned for death or lacked fear for it. Just as many do, the thought of dying - particularly all on her own - terrified Heng. Yet, when offered the chance to prolong her life through *Nine Sols*’ life support analog and borrowing time off people who had nothing to do with the Solarians’ plight, she could not bring herself to live merely by surviving. Her decision mirrors the decision often made by terminally ill patients who, rather than remaining imprisoned in their isolated sterile hospital room and bed in a deteriorated state, chose to make peace with the fact that they, undoubtedly will die. But they will spend their remaining days in the tender embrace of their loved ones, as a part of the world that gave them life to begin with. It is her recognition of life and death as one cycle and acceptance of it that resonates most strongly with Taoist principles and propels Yi’s decision to free the Solarians of their endless suffering in the true ending.

*“Each separate being in the universe returns to the common source. Returning to the source is serenity.*

*If you don’t realize the source, you stumble in confusion and sorrow. When you realize where you come from, you naturally become ... [i]mmersed in the wonder of the Tao[.] You can deal with whatever life brings you, and when death comes, you are ready.”*

-- Laozi (tld. by Mitchell)

The acceptance of death as an inevitability is also prevalent in *Nine Sols*’ gameplay. As a game boasting Souls-like difficulty in its combat, *Nine Sols* expects its players to fail multiple combat encounters and understand that they will not be able to avoid death as they attempt to progress. Several Root Nodes are provided as checkpoints in key areas - particularly right by boss arenas - to respawn the player upon death. Similar mechanics exist in comparable Metroidvanias such as *Hollow Knight* or the *Ori* series. But *Nine Sols* extends it beyond being a staple part of its gameplay and uses the inevitability of player failure to enhance its Taoist themes. Players must understand that they *will* constantly die and fail, but it is a natural part of the cycle that betters their gameplay and allows them to transition to a higher skill level. Accepting that this is a necessary part of the game’s intended design is what grants players the ability to “empty [their] mind of all thoughts [and] let [their] heart be at peace” (Laozi). Only then will they be able to overcome all that crosses their path and fell the unyielding enemies standing before them.

## Strongest Element

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Given that *Nine Sols* was Red Candle Game’s first foray into the Metroidvania genre, the team initially took heavy inspiration from *Hollow Knight* to create what they affectionately called “Hollow Cat” (qtd. and tld. by Contributors to NineSols). As the game’s development progressed, the developers crafted and perfected *Nine Sols*’ most enthralling narrative element: a parry-based combat system designed around the game’s Taoist-based narrative. Unlike the combat found in many other Metroidvanias where players seek opportunities to overwhelm their enemies with an onslaught of attacks - an evasive but aggressive means of combat - *Nine Sols* draws its design from a Taoist concept known as *wu wei* (無為). The concept dissuades practitioners from being stiff and inflexible, intent on forcing their way through obstacles with sheer physical strength and/or will. People should not attempt to overcome force with force by fruitlessly swimming against an upstream current. Rather, they should instead embrace “effortless action” and follow the flow of what is, minimizing the strength they must exert and suffering they must endure to prevail over their enemies. Thus, it is the enemies who relentlessly attack the player without end. With only a scarce few openings between the bosses’ seemingly neverending strikes, the player must recognize that their usual approaches will not succeed. Like the game’s ubiquitous message on yielding and finding peace in what is, the player

must be as soft and yielding as the reeds in a storm, dancing to the tune that the enemies set to effectively parry every blow that comes their way.

*“If a branch is too rigid, it will break. Resist, and you will perish. Know how to yield, and you will survive.”*

-- Liezi

By leaning into their narrative themes and having it harmonize with their gameplay design, *Nine Sols* managed to elevate its gameplay beyond its original base of “Hollow Cat” and grow into an outstanding story-based game of its own merit.

## **Unsuccessful Element**

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Though *Nine Sols* features a dialogue choice system akin to the systems found in games with branching narratives, the feature is heavily underutilized, leading to poor choice design. To understand why the game’s choice design is poor, it is necessary to first lay out what sort of choices the player can make in conversations.

A number of the player’s choices are akin to fluff, in which the player is making choices that are trivial to the story and/or gameplay, such as how much food they would like to eat for dinner. Other options are fundamentally the same choice but reworded, thus railroading the player into the same path, as is the case when the player is given the option to tell Shuanshuan that the Yi he knows is a lie or that he has to go now; both choices lead to Yi leaving Shuanshuan and escaping to the Four Seasons Pavillion. Then, there are choices that serve as a vehicle for the player to learn additional information. Yi is presented with options to ask about various topics, in which the other character Yi is speaking to will give Yi and the player expository information that they aren’t aware of. Because these tidbits of information are exposition, the player is able to experience every option without consequence.

The only moments the player’s choices are impactful are when interacting with the Shanhai 9000 robots - where they either choose to forcibly remove the robot’s chip or pay a certain amount of Jin to obtain map data information - and the player’s choice for the ending. However, Jin is a fairly easy currency to accumulate within the game, meaning the stakes are minimal. The reward the player gets for sparing all of the Shanhai 9000 robots also has no influence on the player’s mechanics or the narrative. Thus, the only dialogue option to impact the game in a meaningful manner is the choice of whether to save the Apemen or the Solarians for the ending. The feature simply gives the player the illusion of choice.

While the simplest solution would be to remove the dialogue choice system throughout the game and just allow the player to reload at a point prior to the ending to go through with either the normal or true ending, this would ignore the fact that Red Candle Games chose to include the system in their design. But expanding upon the game’s choices to have them meaningfully alter the story with diverging arcs and significant outcomes would then run into the conundrum that many branching narratives end up with: a potentially massive bloat in scope that the budget won’t allow for. Subsequently, my suggestion for improving the game’s dialogue choice design is to have the choices follow through with different interactions on both a mechanical and narrative level in smaller but still effective consequences. Give the player reasons to feel compelled towards one choice over the other by making it clear that these seemingly minor choices do matter.

For instance, the consequences of how the players obtain the chip from the Shanhai 9000 robots could be altered so that the player can forcibly take the chip from the Shanhai 9000 robot to quickly obtain the map data. However, the map data would be incomplete, meaning the player will have to explore the rest of the map to fill it out themselves and may not be aware of how many items they are currently missing. Furthermore, should the player forcibly take the chip from a Shanhai 9000 robot (and in turn, destroy them), this would cause other Shanhai 9000 robots to be wary of Yi and potentially cause the robot to either run away and/or call for help when Yi approaches them, resulting in a platforming or combat challenge. Should the player continue destroying various Shanhai 9000 robots, they could be permanently locked out of completing the Pavilion Shanhai 9000 robot's side story.

By contrast, when the player chooses to pay Jin to get the map data information and wait for the Shanhai 9000 robot to finish making the copy, they could get the complete map information, including how many collectibles are in a given area. The more peaceful option of waiting for the Shanhai 9000 robot to make the copy then results in friendlier relations with the Shanhai 9000 robots and, in turn, could result in discounts when making copies in later maps. Finally, sparing all of the Shanhai 9000 robots could then let the Pavilion Shanhai 9000 robot reveal the location of every collectible the player is still missing and give the player the ability to save the Pavilion Shanhai 9000 robot from their decidedly tragic fate in the original tale-- on top of the little reward the game already gives the player for sparing them all in the original game.

These changes, while small, would lead to more effective choice design as the choices focus on a player's potential goals and playstyle approaches (quick, short-term gain vs long-term gain in the Shanhai 9000 robot example), have clear but different consequences that build into each other, and have visible outcomes for what the player does-- all within the confines of what already exists in the game's current design. Choice design does not have to be accompanied by a sprawling branching narrative in order to be effective. Beyond all else, what makes choice design meaningful is the awareness the player has of their choices and what may come of them: tangible consequences that affect the narrative and/or gameplay in some shape or form, reminders "of the choice they made after they made it," and the inability to "go back and undo their choice after exploring the consequences" (Morrison). Without these elements, the dialogue choice system does little to enrich the player's experience and ends up disappointing them by withholding the agency or impact players expect to have in the larger context of the game.

## Highlight

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In a story filled with poignant and dramatic moments alike, one scene stands out as most deserving of the highlight: Heng's final message to Yi; the loving respite Yi grants himself before he confronts Eigong one final time.

Over the course of *Nine Sols'* narrative, Yi receives messages from his sister on Penglai-- messages that he merely listens to without ever responding. When coupled with Heng's fleeting appearance at the beginning of the game and Yi reminiscing about his past life with Heng, it becomes evident to the player that Heng is someone he deeply cherishes. Why then, does he never utter a word to his sister during her calls, even as she pleads for him to return? At first, the player is led to believe that Yi is too preoccupied with his quest for revenge to pay her any mind. Then, they are misdirected into thinking that Yi's silence is owed to the two's falling out. While both are true to some extent, it is only once Yi hears Heng's last message that the fog clears and the player understands the deeply buried reason why Yi never said anything.



Unlike all of the Solarians who boarded New Kunlun to prolong their brittle lives, the Solarians who remained on Penglai have already succumbed to the Tianhuo Virus. Like the stars that captivated her, Heng's letters are a remnant of the "brilliance [she left] behind as [she] burn[ed] away ... travel[ing] thousands, if not millions of light-years to reach [Yi] ... All that's left [of her] are the last vestiges of [her] final moments. Echoes from the past." Heng passed away, long before the events of the game. And with every message Yi receives from her, he is painfully reminded of how he cast Heng aside in their final moments together and that the last thing he said to her was that he wanted to forget her.

But forget he has not.

Heng's every word and glance haunts him wherever he goes, forcing him to don a silent, unfeeling mask and hide the gravity of his regrets-- all so that he can avoid being consumed by his own self-loathing, redirecting it to the people around him in his misaligned search for closure. It is a tragedy of his own doing, and one he cannot bring himself to accept until he begins to approach the end of his journey. Swaddled in the sentiments - the hopes and dreams, the warmth and heart - of everyone he has encountered on his journey, Yi stops and takes a moment to hear Heng's final message. In this fragile lull in time, the mask breaks, and Yi finally, *finally* gives voice to the grief gnawing at his heart. He can never go back and silence the scorn he showed to Heng before he could utter them. What is done is done. He cannot take it back, leaving a gaping hole in his heart.

At last, Yi accepts this. He is finally able to make peace with Heng's death and move onward, knowing that, when his time comes, he will see her again.

The execution of this scene mirrors the player's experience with Yi's own. Games often avoid taking control away from the player due to their interactive nature; in a medium as active as games, the player needs to be shown that their actions mean something in the grand scheme of the story. This time, however, the lack of agency is a boon. It forces the player to sit with the fact that the sister they have grown to care for throughout the game - the one they *know* Yi deeply cares for - had died long before the start of their journey and accept that, though she is gone, she went in peace, content to "speak" with Yi one final time. No matter how much they may wish for things to change, they are as helpless to time and the inevitability of death as Yi - as everyone - is. And though Heng may have passed on, joining the earth and heavens she so loved, Yi and the player now understand that death is not the end. She remains in this world as a part of them; as a part of the sun dappling through the trees; as a part of the thousand winds embracing them; as a part of the boundless sea lapping the shores, for all eternity. It is the perfect culmination of all that Yi and the player have learned throughout the story of *Nine Sols* and an exemplary showcase of how people process the loss of those they love.

Thus, Yi and the player press on with a single line to emphasize the finality of it all; to close this chapter in Yi's life: "*You have no more unread messages from Penglai.*"

## Critical Reception

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### **GameRadar Review by Hirun Cryer - 4/5**

Cryer describes *Nine Sols* as "a personal Kill Bill-style revenge story dripping in as much mystery as it is blood" filled with the same kind of horror that Red Candle Games is known for. While the game's worldbuilding and Taoist inspirations may be difficult for newcomers to grasp

early on, Cryer notes that *Nine Sols* manages to tie its philosophy and ideas back into the story just enough for it to enhance both Yi's quest for revenge and its exploration of cyberpunk-style transhumanism themes. The writing does, however, fall flat for Cryer at times due to its awkward pacing and strangely immature fat-shaming jokes. He feels the jokes are completely out of place in the game's otherwise sublime storytelling and decreases the likability of the character being shamed and the characters making the jokes in the first place. But Cryer ultimately finds *Nine Sols* to be "a stellar story of revenge and regret"-- one that makes for a "rapturous experience."

### **TheGamer Review by James Kennedy - 4/5**

Amidst the many *many* indie Metroidvanias releasing in the current day and age, Kennedy finds *Nine Sols*' tried-and-true revenge story fresh in its visual execution with particular praise for the seamless way the game "weaves its cutscenes into the gameplay" and artfully implements its worldbuilding into its environment. However, Kennedy feels that Yi makes for a rather unpleasant protagonist for no discernible reason. When combined with the game's dated and immature jokes, the dialogue writing ends up falling short of excellence. Though it takes awhile to get going, what truly carries the story is the world's intricate lore and Yi's genuinely heartwarming relationship with Shuanshuan, giving fans of the Metroidvania genre something they will undoubtedly enjoy amidst the oversaturated market.

## **Lessons**

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**Narratives that embrace the specifics of culture and naturally integrate it as a part of the story's lore are fully capable of resonating with wider audiences unfamiliar with them.**

The unique experiences of people from different walks of life, brought up in a culture unlike those of their audience, can lead to greater understanding and appreciation for cultural diversity. However, introducing people to unfamiliar concepts can be a challenge. Games and stories can alleviate this gap by treating culture as a part of the lore and worldbuilding: something that is already familiar to the characters and inspires players to learn more themselves. Even if players miss some details, they will still recognize there is an undeniable depth to the story and are still capable of enjoying it nonetheless-- just as they do in *Nine Sols*.

**Choice design can be a compelling narrative tool to actively engage players in the story, but these choices must have lasting impact - no matter how small - on the story or gameplay.**

Because games are an interactive medium in which the player is an active part of the experience, many delight in the opportunity to influence the game's narrative in their choices. Thus, when presenting the player with options, it is necessary for a narrative designer to account for the stakes and goals behind each choice the player can make and what long-term effects their actions have on the characters and/or environment around them. Otherwise, the players may realize that their choices lack purpose and that their "choices" are a thinly-veiled illusion of the agency they could have had.

**An effective narrative-focused game elevates - not overshadows - gameplay by giving narrative reason and purpose to the game's mechanics.**

Few games begin development with their story. Rather, the game's concept and genre establish the mechanics and features the game should have. *Nine Sols* uses several staples of Metroidvania games as a part of its gameplay but seamlessly justifies their existence as diegetic aspects of the story and characters. The game goes above and beyond by having its Taoist-based themes guide the design for its combat, differentiating itself from similar games like *Hollow Knight* as a parry-based system-- one of the first of its kind for a 2D platformer. Through a balance of

gameplay and narrative in its design, *Nine Sols* successfully engages the player in a distinct but compelling experience that enhances the game beyond being just another Metroidvania.

**Remember that stories are fractals: each section and moment of a game should be designed as its own narrative experience.**

Individual parts of a story do not exist in a vacuum. Within every arc and moment is another story, deserving of its own attention and care. It is important to keep this in mind when writing a story and designing a game's intended narrative experience as the story's interconnected parts - what the player is meant to feel in every single moment - make up the game as a whole. They are the fundamental parts of a broader, more enriching narrative landscape made cohesive by the themes and connections they share, build, and reinforce onto each other.

## Summation

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In a genre filled with games heavily focused on their gameplay with little certainty to the player's narrative experience, *Nine Sols* stands out as a striking example of how story-rich Metroidvanias could be approached. With an impeccable balance of narrative and design - both as their own distinct parts and as interconnected parts of a greater whole - the game delivers a poignant story reflective of Taoist principles. It urges its players to appreciate all that life already has to offer before their inevitable end and not take it for granted. Not all progress will uplift society to greater heights; remember what it is that makes us all human, and, in the pursuit for greatness, remain skeptical of what it is that greatness might cost. After all, our existence - our very planet - is just as susceptible to ending as the most intricately designed ceramics are to shattering. So live and know that it is enough to have existed. Live life to its fullest so that, when death comes, you are ready to pay back all that the cosmos have given you.

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