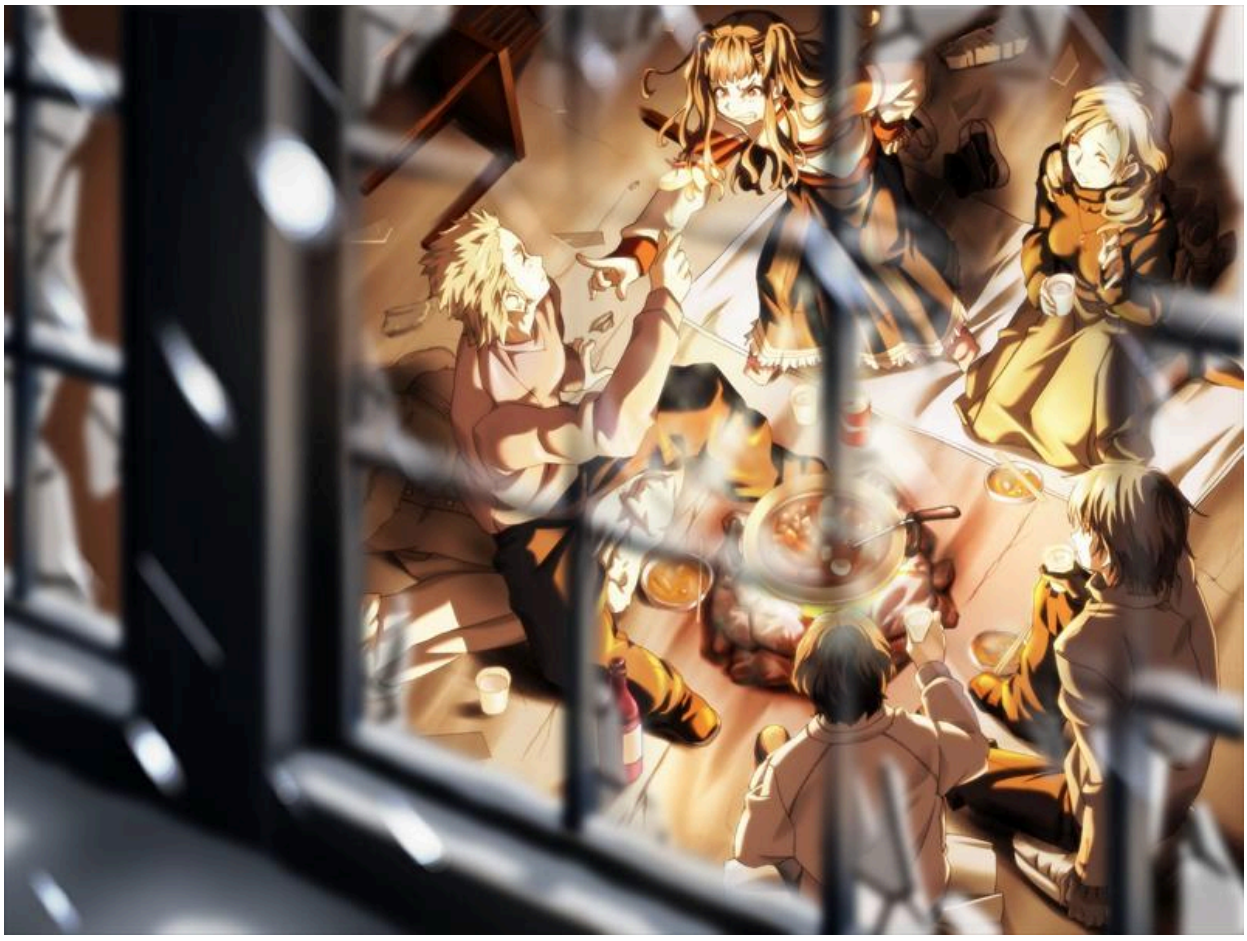
CW: Mentions of sexual assault, murder, genocide, cults, and many other sensitive subjects.

SWAN SONG

Introduction

Preface



Right around the beginning of this channel, I told myself that something I'd do is cover at least one game by every famous author in the history of visual novels. That may not sound like a

grand task for a super niche form of art that's been around for less than 50 years, but you would be surprised just how many are in that category. Tanaka Romeo, Fumiaki Maruto, Kinoko Nasu, Jun Maeda, TADA, Hiruta Masato, Sca-Ji, Ou Jackson, Hayashi Naotaka… and that's just to name a *few* who've written games that changed the landscape of visual novels, and subsequently, Japanese media as a whole.

But for as much headway as I've made in this grand task, I still have a *loooong* way to go before accomplishing that lofty goal – and one of the biggest omissions up to this point has been anything by Setoguchi Ren'ya. In his over 20 year long career, Setoguchi has taken the lead few times, but each of those times have been profound and fascinating; like the dark Taisho drama *Hirahira Hihiru*, the coming of age musician story in *MUSICUS*, or the sci-fi crime thriller *Black Sheep Town*.

With exception to his somewhat controversial first work, every single title Setoguchi has led has been well received by the visual novel public at large. Perhaps above anything else he's been a part of however, it's the second game he wrote that's left the greatest impact on VN readers all over the world; a critically acclaimed and beloved story about the world coming to an end; about human nature itself; and about having hope for humanity, even when humanity may be hopeless.

Opening



Released in 2005 exclusively for Windows in Japan, with fan translations to English, Russian, Korean, Chinese, and Spanish following throughout the years [1], Swan Song follows the story of six eclectic people who survive an apocalyptic event in a small Japanese town; the lives they once knew, and so many of the people they cherished, destroyed by a sudden and devastating earthquake.

With no way to contact the outside world - if the outside world even exists anymore - they're left with no choice but to band together and brave the horrific snow storms, before long finding signs of other living people. But not everyone is willing to come together: some choose to embrace the chaos, while others hold steadfast to ideals of cultish religion or staunch moralism at the cost of peace. And as the group of six will soon learn… the weight of the world's end may be enough to change people forever.

On its surface, Swan Song looks like any other apocalypse or disaster story scenario, and it in many ways follows plot beats and patterns that the public at large has come to expect from the genre. But what makes Swan Song so special is in *how* it gets to these beats through its fascinating and flawed cast, and in the often misunderstood but beautiful message that I believe hides within this story.

Setoguchi is regularly painted as a writer of utsuuge [2] - depressing games - and to an extent, I understand this perception based on my time with his first work, Carnival, and now Swan Song. There is no hiding that this is a brutal, dark, and often extremely fucked up story that goes well beyond a lot of mainstream disaster fiction in what it's willing to show, and many of its critical threads are tied up in ways that feel as if they're mourning what's become of humanity.

For as many moments of happiness there are here, there are twice as many if not far more made of despair, betrayal, manipulation, and horrific mass violence that brazenly shows how cruel people can be. That much is true. But what I think people often get wrong in their analysis is believing that all of this makes Swan Song a story *about* the hopelessness of humanity, and *about* human nature as something inherently violent, disgusting, and ready to wreak havoc without society's shackles.

Swan Song is, in my view, a cautionary tale about the world we live in *now*. It's about the perils of the artificial society that exists *now*, and how the end of the world and the collapse of rule reveals the horrors that the unwanted, the sick, the convicted, the unsightly, see every day. It's about how deep down, humans are - even when they are all of those undesirable things - something incredible, capable of incredible things… but it does not shy away from how humanity is often corrupted into selfish brutality.

Swan Song is a game that, in a time where the country I was born in is brazenly displaying the full extent of its cruelty with more pride than ever before, where resistance against the machine feels hopeless, has reminded me of just what we're all fighting for – and that even if societies ills were to come to their logical conclusion and everything were to go truly to hell, that there is still *hope* for the goodness in us all to prosper. So, if I may, give me a bit to tell you just why I love this game so much – and why I think you'll love both it, and the people supporting this video: DLSite!

A Quick Word

Indie games are, as the kids would say, pretty darned pogchamp. And as someone who's been working on games and writing about them for around a decade now, one of the spaces that continues to surprise me the most is the Japanese indie scene. Every single day, countless incredible new titles are being worked on and released by talented developers who push the boundaries of what can be done within their medium of choice – and in my opinion, there is simply no better way to explore that vast ocean of art than with DLSite!

For well over 20 years, DLSite has been one of *the* premiere ways to explore the vast world of Japanese media, with everything from cozy ASMRs and intense RPG Maker thrill rides to sensual gay manga and life-changing visual novels, developed by everyone from game devs flying solo to large studios full of talented teams. And that includes much of what I've covered on this channel, including today's game!

If this video gets you at all interested in playing Swan Song, then you'll be happy to know you can easily find a copy of it compatible with the English patch on DLSite. In fact, DLSite sells a *lot* of art in a whole bevy of mediums and genres that can be experienced in English *and* many other languages, with the site itself being navigable in over a dozen. No matter where you live, they make it super easy to enjoy the wide world of Japanese media all from one easy to navigate website!

And there's always something new and exciting no matter your budget, especially with their regular coupons and sales - such as the on-going summer sale with up to 98% off thousands of games, including this game! So if you wanna dive head first into the vast world of incredible Japanese art, then follow the link in the description or on-screen and take advantage of the amazing sale until August 13th!

I have to give a big thanks to DLSite for not only supporting this channel, but for continuing to make niche Japanese media accessible all across the world. As someone who lives in a country with high taxes on imports, digital distribution is one of the only ways I can readily support the art I love and the artists who create it, so I am *incredibly* grateful for their easy to use website, vast catalogue, and amazing deals. So again, if you wanna check out what they have in store, then follow the link in the description, and save some cash while the summer sale lasts.

Now, with all that said, I think it's time to finally dive into the world of Swan Song – and see what becomes of humanity, after the end.

Story

Synopsis



Set within a small town in then-contemporary Japan, Swan Song begins on what seems like any other Christmas Eve from the perspective of a university student, Tsukasa Amako: quiet, calm, and so very, very cold. But this normalcy is suddenly upended when a massive earthquake strikes out of nowhere; the pavements crack and crumble, buildings collapse in on themselves, and people are engulfed alive by the rubble and the freezing snow.

By some luck, Tsukasa manages to survive, and along the way to finding shelter, comes upon a young disabled girl named Aroe, and her dying older sister. Though her sister is doubtful she'll make it in this world due to her difficulties, Tsukasa stays firm in his conviction to keep Aroe safe and brings her along, ultimately making his way to a church where he meets with four other survivors: the charismatic and friendly Shin Tanomura, the gentle Yuka Sasaki, the brash and honest Hibari Kawase, and the nervous and moralistic but intelligent otaku Takuma Kuwagata.

Though the group bickers and discourses, they soon get to know each other and huddle around a campfire to put together just what's happened: and as it stands, with no access to the radio or the internet, but hints that other people may have survived such as church bells resounding at night, it seems the best course of action is to try and find other survivors. And through braving the worsening snow storms and horrific sights of corpses littered through the town; now cleaved

in half with a massive swamp in the middle of it; they manage to find a camp of some 300 survivors led by one Ryuutarou Hida, taking refuge in school and hospital buildings.

Hope, it seems, is not all lost… but it doesn't take long before differences in opinions lead to fractures and conflicts within the group, with a cult known as the Daichi Society serving as the greatest splinter. Some such as Takuma believe that it must be eradicated at all costs for its persuasive New Age mysticism and willingness to house known criminals, while others like Tanomura and Hida hope for a peaceful, cooperative solution in these trying times.

As hostile forces and internal fractures threaten the safety of the group, and the necessity to kill and steal to survive wears down the psyche of all, questions begin to arise: is the world truly gone for good, or was this small town a victim of isolated circumstance? Who will survive the cruel apocalypse, and what will become of those who are forced - or even willing - to commit terrible acts to live? What dark secrets are the survivors hiding, and what will happen to them as they're forced to see the worst of humanity? And above all… what does it take to survive, when survival seems futile?

The End of the World



As I mentioned just a moment ago, Swan Song - on its surface - sounds very similar to a lot of other apocalyptic disaster stories out there: bad thing happens, a group of unrelated survivors encounter each other, they band together, and eventually falter in some ways due to unresolved personal problems and the weight of the world bearing down on them. It's Writing 101 for the genre, and Setoguchi manages to take these basics and refine them into something that feels special through sheer gusto alone.

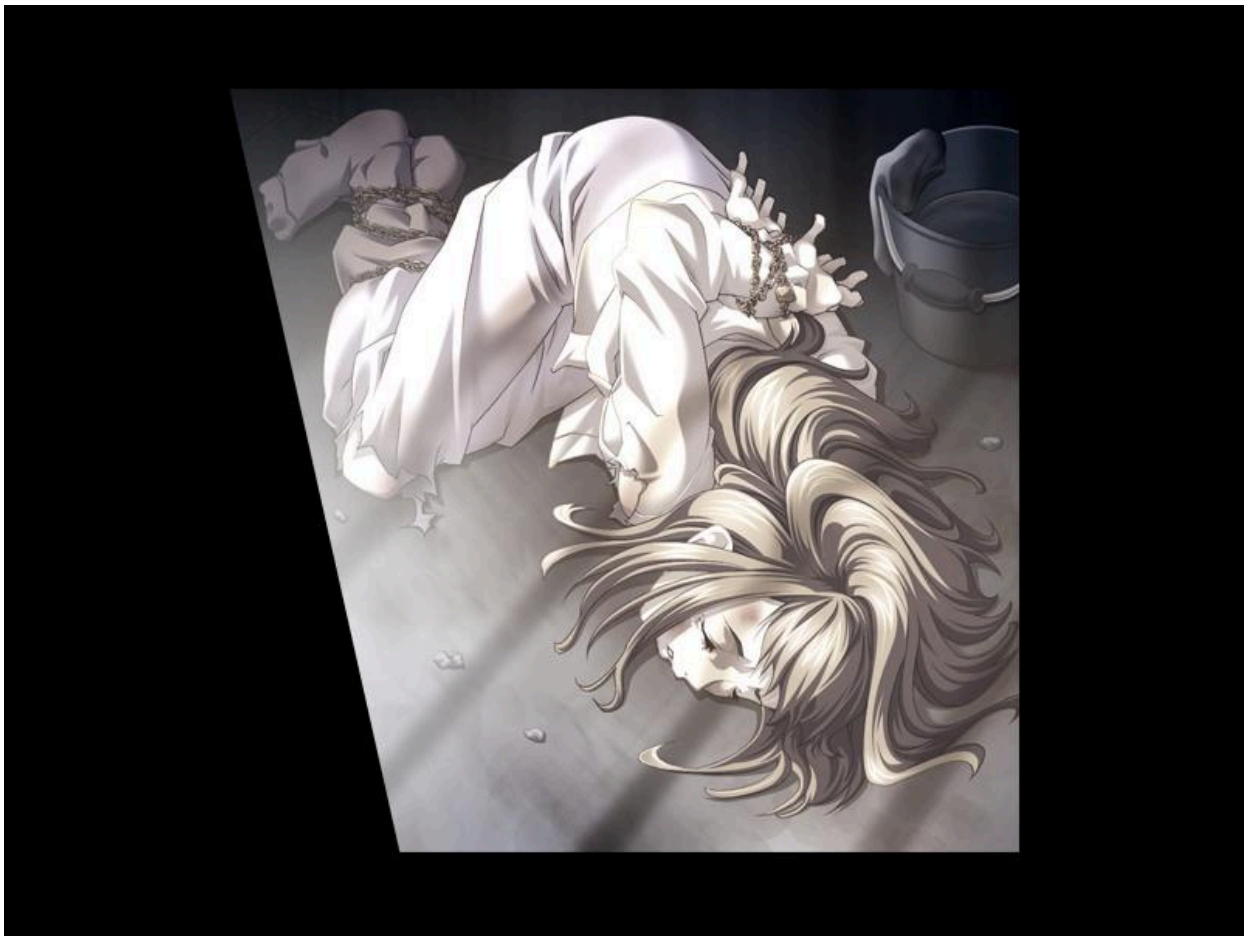
Swan Song's world feels real, defined, and grounded; nothing ever leaps out as absurd or unbelievable to the reader, and it instead feels like an honest depiction of what a localized apocalyptic climate event might look like to those living through it. The prose gives incredible human detail to the way buildings are ready to break at any moment, how the conditions reject human life, how everything happening wears down survivors in ways both subtle and obvious, and so forth.

It's a world that's always interesting to engage with, and always feels like it's trying to reflect *something* about ours back at us beyond merely saying "humanity bad," in the same way that great books of the genre like Olivia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* do. It's something that disaster fiction has always been uniquely suited to do, but I feel has gotten somewhat lost over

time as the genre becomes more and more saturated, which might be part of why this game has gotten a reputation it has over the years.

I've seen many people say that Swan Song is uniquely fucked up with what it depicts, and I mean… yeah, if you're comparing it to *Waterworld* or *Zombieland* or something, sure. But compared to some popular literature within the genre, and especially those written by minorities like the aforementioned *Parable of the Sower* or Premee Mohammed's *What Can We Do for You*, I really don't think Swan Song is that out of line.

That said however, Swan Song is still unflinching with what it's willing to depict. Genocides, sexual assault, kidnappings, and a significant amount more with prose that treats the subjects with the amount of gravitas they deserve. It is *deeply* uncomfortable as a read, and while that may turn some people away… I'm not necessarily sure you *should* be totally comfortable with those things?



I too enjoy games where I get to senselessly blow stuff up, and I am also extremely normal about the fantasy of being kidnapped by a hot woman who strips me of my humanity and ability to consent, but I do think it's important every once in a while to have art that actually reflects the reality of the worlds horrors back to us rather than abstracting it for funsies. Swan Song is one

such piece of art; it walks the fine tight rope of portraying horrific things well, without lessening their impact or showing them purely to scare the viewer with the spectacle of brutality.

There is genuine meaning here, and I think one of the key things it's interested in exploring is human nature - or rather, the dialogs *we have* about human nature. Some claim that Swan Song is ultimately a game about how; without the order and rule of society; people will become destructive animals, ready to pillage, assault, and destroy everything around them in the name of self-preservation, a belief even echoed late into the stories climatic hours by a certain character.

But as I see it, the brutalities that happen in Swan Song because of the apocalypse are not reflective of human nature gone wild without rules, but rather of the horrors of the systems that exist within our societies. We live in a world that encourages people to seek power and to fight for themselves alone, rather than to seek community and to work towards a common good – and as such, without anything holding people back from embracing society's ideals and goals, some go head-first into it.

For as many characters as there are who reject this and believe in the good of the people, there are just as many who've fully bought into this. And as such, there's a strong sense throughout the game that anything, at any moment, could go wrong; and that trusting people is as much a necessity as it is a vector for error.

It's not necessarily a horror atmosphere that always keeps you on your toes, but it is a dour, dreary, and nerve-wracking one that regularly instills a feeling of uncertainty and worry over what's to come, only broken up by moments of peace that remind the reader of the good in humanity, and what it could be with more mercy and respect. These are the moments where Swan Song truly lives and breathes, and what takes it from a depressing reflection only on humanities ugliness, to a yearning for its greatness.

An Eclectic Group



None of this would come together without a solid cast of characters however, and Swan Song certainly provides that. It's quite an expansive cast, too, with a massive amount of unnamed characters throughout, and over a half-dozen named characters besides the original six survivors. Some of them are clearly fighting for good and peace, such as Ryuutarou Hida; a kind older man who works to hold the survivors group together, and welcomes the initial six cast members in with open arms.

Others, however, are a bit more questionable; such as members of the Daichi Society cult, who act as the religious counter to the secular survivors group, and welcome even known criminals if they wish to reform. Because of how late they come into the game it's hard to say more about them without getting into spoilers, but suffice to say, they're the main driving force for one of this game's most thought-provoking topics: retributive versus punitive justice, and the roles religion and secular society occupy in that.

But the original six *are* the ones who get the bulk of the focus, with Tsukasa Amako arguably being the protagonist. Son of a world famous pianist, and a former aspiring concert player until an unfortunate event irreparably damaged his right hand, he's a quiet, often unemotive person who speaks formally and with great detail, but that doesn't mean it's at all unempathetic or uncaring. Quite the opposite in fact; perhaps because of his hardships, Tsukasa often shows a

lot of understanding for people around him and a willingness to learn, with strong, loving convictions on how the world and its people ought to be.

Reflecting all of this, Tsukasa's monologuing and prose has a *very* dry style to the point that some people consider it infodumping. Practically every single thing that catches his attention gets told to the reader in immense detail akin to a Wikipedia article, and while I get how some people may find that tiring to read, I personally found it - at least in the original Japanese - to be *extremely* engaging.

You don't often see this sort of non-fiction, book-esque style writing in visual novels, and that specific way of thinking and talking feels very familiar to me as an autistic person. …actually, to be frank, Tsukasa in general gives off some serious neurodivergent vibes. And beyond it just being interesting representation, it's also important to the themes of the story as I'll discuss shortly.



Takuma is pretty much the opposite of Tsukasa, and gets the most time in the narrative besides him. Nervous and prone to emotional outbursts, he's a stereotypical shut-in otaku that struggles to talk to people - particularly women - and always carries an air of anxiety and self-hate with him wherever he goes. Despite this however, he *seemingly* has a good heart, and feels deeply

for all of the lives lost and all of the tragedies that unfold around him, believing that those who opt not to help, or even hurt others, *must* be punished.

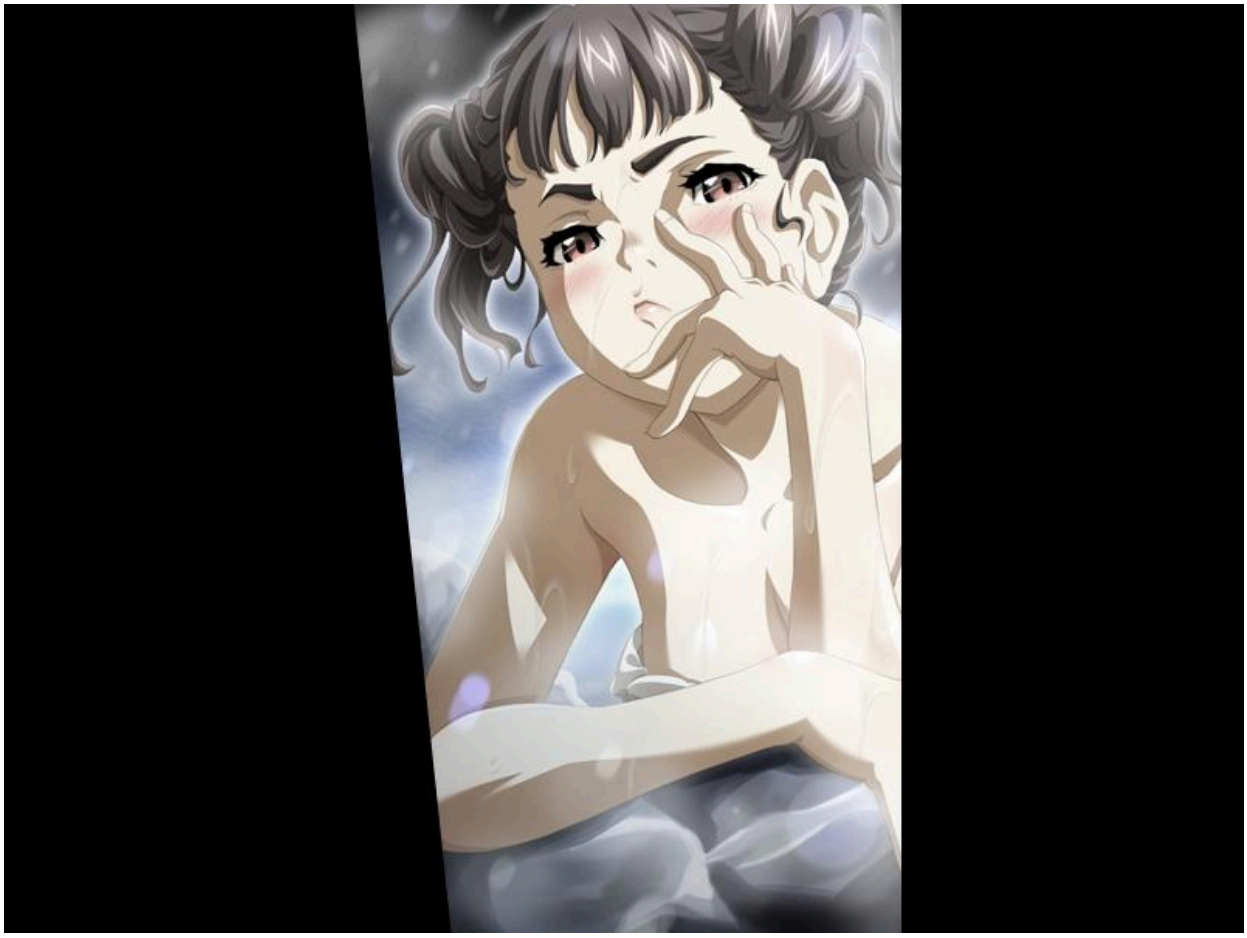
Without getting into spoilers, he is one of *the* most interesting characters in the game for the directions he ends up going, and for just how well signaled they are from the very start. It's apparent that he's a very, very troubled person prone to making bad decisions, with an erratic black and white thought process shown in his scattered, inconsistent prose. It really has the same energy as a shaking dog that's one bad gesture away from killing over in fear of going to the groomers, except the dog has access to a lead pipe.

The last of the three main men, Tanomura, is probably the closest this game has to a typical VN protagonist tough guy in terms of personality – he's caring, wise, and not at all afraid to be a smarmy little shit that makes goofy jokes and plays around with people he cares about for fun. He's naturally suited for being a leader and as such, often picks up that role whether he opts into it or not.

While he's the type of character that I personally find to get exhausting when given all the focus, the way the narrative gives attention to everyone else quite equally led to me actually appreciating him a lot, to the point I'd say he's the highlight of any scene in which he shows up. He's got so much energy and charisma yet it never feels overwhelming, and there's a few god-tier moments in the story with him to boot.

The polar opposite of the friendly oaf is Hibari; a bratty university student who speaks exactly what she's thinking, which is not always nice and peachy. As difficult as that honesty can be to deal with, especially for people like the highly sensitive Takuma, it's also a much needed trait in a challenging time like this, making her quite welcome among the group. Plus, when she is cute and sweet, it's all the more special; very strong little sister energy coming from her that leads to some truly incredible chemistry with Tanomura. You can just *tell* she cares about him, but can't bring herself to fess up to it.

In comparison to her bratty best friend, Yuka is a lot more careful with what she says and does, to the point it can be difficult to read her true intentions and feelings. She often keeps to herself and stays quiet, tending to things like cooking or support for others in her vicinity, with Tsukasa being really the only person she's willing to completely open up to… or so it seems. Her character is *very* hard to say much about without spoiling practically the entire game, but suffice to say, she may just be my favorite overall despite not having as many individually memorable moments as Tanomura or Hibari.



And then, last but not least, is Aroe – a girl who appears to be in her late teens, but acts like a young child, with a lack of communication skills leading to outbursts, misunderstandings, and difficulty following along with others. While this sometimes leads people to become frustrated with her, many - and especially Hibari - do their best to understand and work with her, leading them to find her as a welcome presence with a couple of incredible and unique skills.

Long before I knew anything else about Swan Song, I saw discourse about Aroe and how the game handles her disability. While it's not said until a decent ways through the full game, the unique prequel story in a magazine demo makes no attempt to hide that she's autistic and diagnosed, making her one of the very few examples of not only a canonically autistic woman in visual novels, but maybe *the* only example of one who has high support needs. And that has led to a *lot* of hot takes on her character over the years.

Some see her as an annoying childish nuisance, others see her as an example of infantilizing autism representation, and yet others see her as a welcome and 'pure' presence in contrast to all the manmade horrors beyond our comprehension. I can sort of understand all the different perspectives, even if they're all varying levels of insulting, but I personally see the secret fourth option: she's an optimistic and honest depiction of autism with high support needs, written by

someone who is deeply sympathetic but still struggles with the trappings people often fall into when writing those characters.

The most apparent of those is the way the story, despite having multiple perspectives, never gives *her* perspective on *her* terms. Though she is treated as someone who is as human and worthy of life as any other individual, the discussions around her can sometimes feel like people are debating her worthiness for her and subsequently wrestling her agency away from her, and into the hands of people who are more “capable” of expressing it.

I get this is a thorny, difficult path to tread when talking about people who are disabled in ways that make self-advocacy as understood by general society difficult. Which is a bit of a self-perpetuating cycle, because people with things like Down syndrome, high support needs autism, schizophrenia, and so forth, are often denied the tools and rights by hostile dominant social structures to advocate on their own terms, which further creates the impression they can’t do so at all.

But this isn’t a video or a game about how society strips disabled people of their advocacy rights, so I’ll get to my point and save that for later. The game has multiple perspectives as a key narrative feature, and I think it would have been interesting to have a scene from Aroe’s perspective so we can see how *she* sees the world, informed by the opinions and perspectives of high support needs autistic people and disability activists. Because - as even the story itself makes clear - she is capable of far more than people think, and simply works in different ways that require different needs.



As difficult as all this is however, I feel how Aroe functions within the narrative and the discussions the game has because of it, are as accepting as they can be within its framework, as they portray disabled people with high support needs not as lesser than other people, as they so often are framed by neurotypical people, but rather as people who simply think differently and have different needs. This feels fairly intuitive to me, but I know plenty of people; even supposed leftists; who hold extremely ableist views regarding disability.

The discussions characters have about this don't feel like mere hollow platitudes and gestures towards disability respect, but rather serious discussions that people unfamiliar with the topic of neurodivergency would have - even people who may very well be neurodivergent like Tsukasa. It's at times difficult, and people at times say terrible things, but the ultimate conclusion is that all people; no matter how different they may seem; are still people, and deserve to be treated as people by being met on *their* terms and with how *they* interact with the world.

Alongside its commentary on human nature and how we perceive it, *this* I believe is one of the key ideas of Swan Song's narrative, and something Setoguchi has been interested in throughout his entire career. You can see it all the way back in the beginning with *Carnival*, flawed as that game may be in my view, and now in the modern day with *Hira Hira Hihiru*'s focus on the mistreatment of the 'undesirable' in society.

Swan Song's setting provides a unique avenue for Setoguchi to explore this, because it puts people who may be divergent, who may be deeply flawed, who may be troubled, into a setting where the social safety nets for their difficulties - few as there are - no longer exist, and mistakes can be grave. They're people who may already be seen as weaker than the rest in society, and yet the narrative persists: these are people all the same, and they deserve to live no matter what.

It's an idea that's always been poignant and meaningful, but it's one that I think strikes especially well today given how discussion around disability and neurodivergency is becoming increasingly more common – and as cloaked ableist, eugenicist rhetoric continues to make ways within political spaces, most especially on the far right. But again, leftists aren't immune to it either, and if I see one more of you say shit that strips disabled people of their agency *I AM GOING TO THROW A BOOK AT YOUR FACE.*

It's a kind of deep empathy the overall narrative expresses towards everyone within it, and that includes people who are often not granted *any* empathy such as former and active criminals, of which the game is also *very* concerned with recognizing their circumstances and treating them as human, without ignoring the consequences of their actions. It's a difficult topic to tread, but I think Swan Song has some legit good musings on it as I'll talk about later.

Shared Perspectives



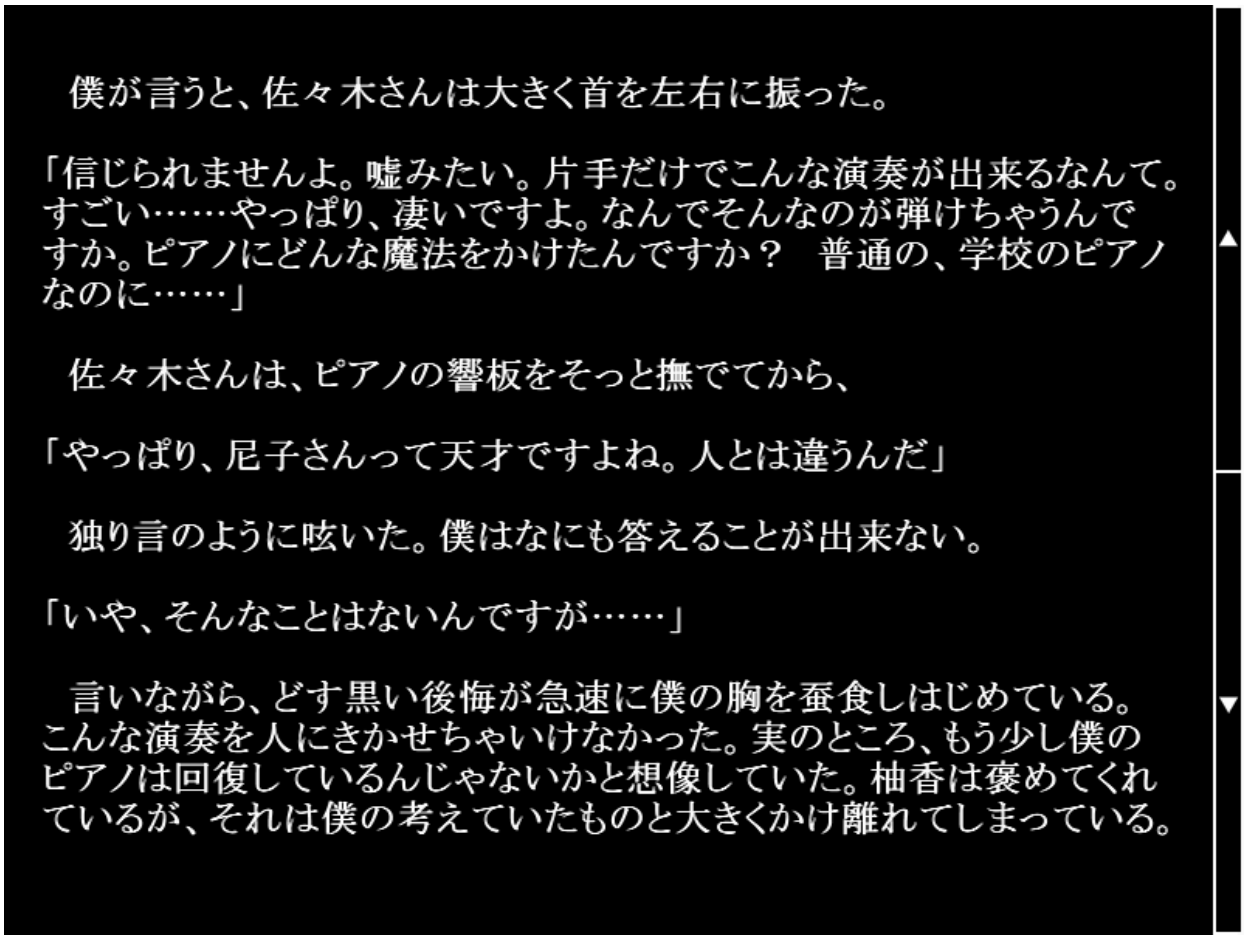
What makes all of this come to life is the usage of multiple narrative perspectives, perhaps the most defining trait of Swan Song. With the unfortunate exception of Aroe, all of the initial survivors are given multiple segments in which their viewpoint is centered, often signaled to the reader with a brief transitionary screen. It allows the story to not only better flesh out its characters through giving us looks into their internal thought processes, but it allows the story to juggle multiple synchronous narratives simultaneously, giving a *very* fleshed out view of current events across multiple locations.

The best point of comparison I can come up with is the multi-view format of the previously covered *Tsui no Sora*, and its pseudo-remake, *SubaHibi*. But while those games feature entire routes centering different perspectives, and with some major divergence points and alternative endings in the case of *SubaHibi*, Swan Song is an almost entirely linear experience with the exception of a few bad ends, and an unlockable true ending in the games final hour. On top of that, it's all cleanly segmented into four acts with individual 'scenes,' making the whole experience feel organized and easily compartmentalized.

Something this game does share with SubaHibi however, is in how it manages to make the *feel* of each narrative perspective unique. A lot of times when I look at multiple POV characters from one writer, there's a distinct 'vibe' to how they write prose in all cases. And to be clear, I don't

think this is bad in any way, quite the opposite; I will never pass up an opportunity to read more of Maruto Fumiaki's flowery musings about the world, whether from *Parfait*'s thick-headed goofball Hitoshi or *White Album 2*'s absolute disaster of a man Haruki.

But the avoidance of this is part of why I find myself so fascinated with Setoguchi's writing here. All of the point of view characters have their own way of narrating their life and their view on what's happening, with unique speech and thought patterns that go beyond different Japanese personal pronouns: Tsukasa is very dry like a non-fiction book, Takuma is scattered and informal, Tanomura is casual and collected, Hibari is emotional and honest, and so forth.


僕が言うと、佐々木さんは大きく首を左右に振った。

「信じられませんよ。嘘みたい。片手だけでこんな演奏が出来るなんて。すごい……やっぱり、凄いですよ。なんでそんなのが弾けちゃうんですか。ピアノにどんな魔法をかけたんですか？　普通の、学校のピアノなのに……」

佐々木さんは、ピアノの響板をそっと撫でてから、

「やっぱり、尼子さんって天才ですよね。人とは違うんだ」

独り言のように呟いた。僕はなにも答えることが出来ない。

「いや、そんなことはないんですが……」

言いながら、どす黒い後悔が急速に僕の胸を蚕食しはじめている。こんな演奏を人にきかせちゃいけなかった。実のところ、もう少し僕のピアノは回復しているんじゃないかと想像していた。柚香は褒めてくれているが、それは僕の考えていたものと大きくかけ離れてしまっている。

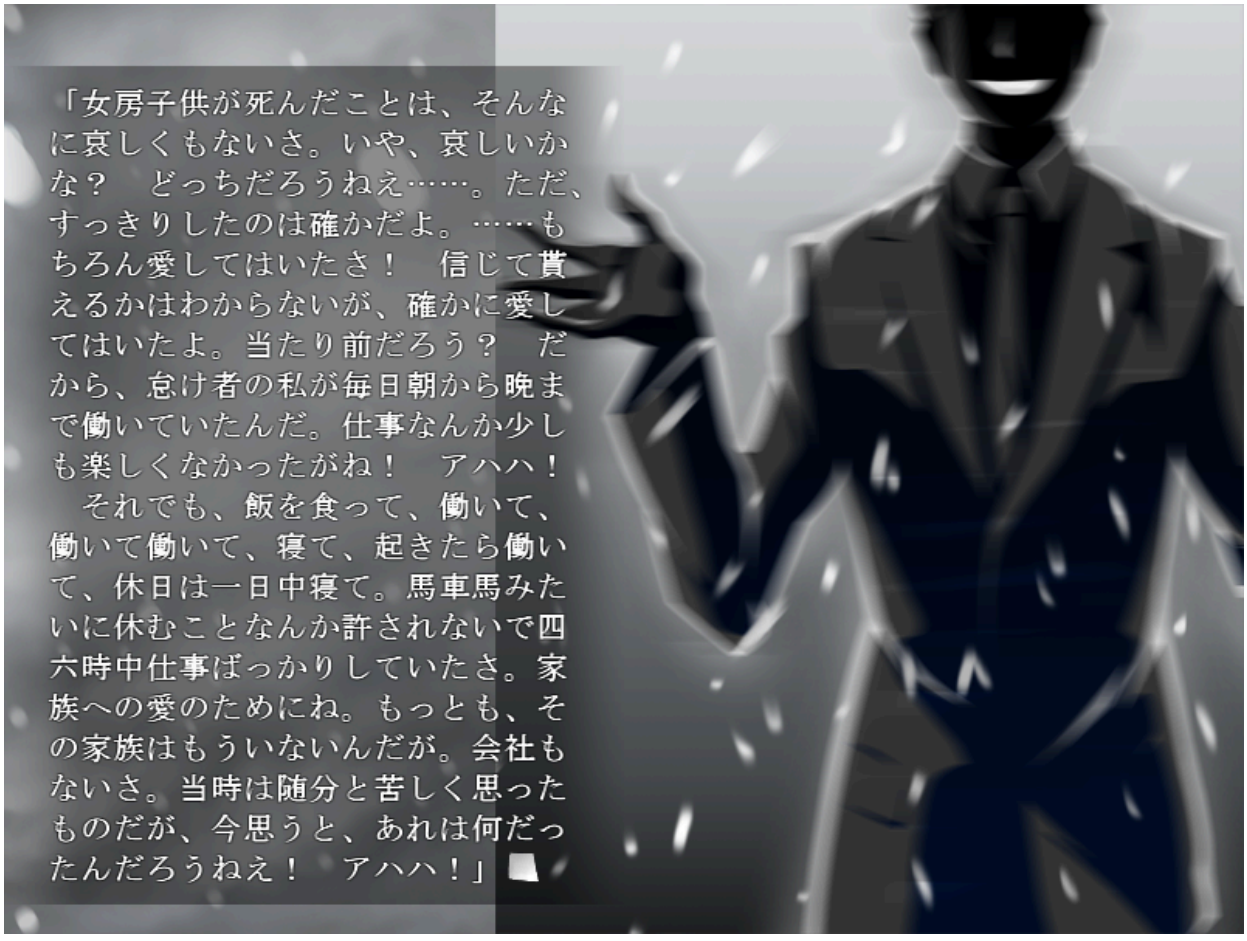
It makes for a narrative that feels like it's constantly shifting in style and tone in a way that adds great variety, but there are still enough consistencies to feel cohesive… especially in regards to how wordy it is. Jesus fucking christ in *heaven*, is Swan Song a wordy ass game. And I realize that probably sounds silly as I say it. In fact, some of you are probably saying, "*Amelie you fool, it's a visual novel! It's a book! Do you not realize books have words, you pea-brain? You malignant oaf? You impotent little infertile slut, you!*"

First off, thank you for recognizing that I'm reproductively useless, I find that fact very erotic. And second, yes, visual novels do have a lot of words, but it's also a medium that typically has heavy

reliance on everything *besides* its words in order to convey meaning: sprites, sound effects, backgrounds, music, and so forth, all work together to convey mood, gestures, actions, and so forth, so words have to expend significantly less effort on realizing all of that. Because of this, visual novels often feel a lot easier to read than paperback Japanese books, and often have very easy to parse blocks of text.

Swan Song, however, pays little heed to this, and instead treats all of these materials as supplementary elements working in parallel, rather than critical elements working in tandem. That isn't to say that things like the score or voice acting or aesthetics are superfluous or bad, because as I'll get to and as I'm sure you've noticed, this game is an aesthetic marvel.

But rather, it's to say that Swan Song felt like reading a paperback novel a lot of the time to me, and I think that's intentional. The vocabulary is much more complicated and diverse than many other visual novels I've covered for this channel, and the game regularly fills the entire screen with blocks of text, in one single go, formatted like pages in a book. With visual novels you often get short chunks you can parse in one glance before you click for the next, but here? No, it's storytime with mommy motherfucker, *and your ass is age-regressing in the baby cradle*.



If you really want to challenge your Japanese reading skills as a learner, then I honestly can't recommend Swan Song enough, because for me, it was the exact kind of "plus one" experience I was looking for after so long of being comfortable with my skills. But if you don't know Japanese or would rather read it in a language you know better, then like I mentioned before, Swan Song has *quite* the number of translations.

Since I don't understand Russian, Chinese, Spanish, or Korean, the only one I can say much about is the English patch created by Yandere Translations; a group led by *Tsukihime* and *Fate/stay night* fan translator TakaJun, probably best known outside of those and Swan Song for helping with the patches for *Sengoku Rance* and *MajiKoi.* [3]

I've previously been critical of Jun's work on this channel, particularly with regards to the quality of their work on Type-Moon games – and while Swan Song is noticeably better than those, there's still things worth noting. As far as I can tell, there's nothing wrong with how the text was interpreted, and it generally doesn't read in an awkward or stilted way. The issue I have with it is one that's unfortunately all too common to Japanese to English translations: and that's the loss of flavor and voice.

While every character has a unique 'feel' and style to their speech and monologue in the original Japanese, the English translation more or less homogenizes it all by staying way too literal to the Japanese text, without considering how speech quirks, levels of formality, grammar choices, and so forth, affect the feel. The kinds of subtle things that equate in English to using 'I am' versus 'I'm,' or 'shall not' versus 'will not,' just aren't represented here, and it strips flavor from the text.

None of this is to say the translation is bad however, nor that you shouldn't play Swan Song in this way. It is ultimately Swan Song with just a bit less spice, and that's still a damn fine visual novel in my book. Plus, the patch works well with the digital release available on DLSite, which is currently on sale for 1500 yen, or 10 US dollary doos - an absolute steal in my mind for what you're getting, so I strongly recommend you follow the links in the description to get your own copy. And maybe some other games while you're at it.

Aesthetics

Striking Uniquities



What is far more than alright however, is the artwork of Swan Song, illustrated by the little known Kawahara Makoto. While they were the lead artist on a handful of other titles, including the English-translated *Trample on Schatten*, as well as an assistant on *Kira Kira* and *Dear Drops* [4], nothing else in their career ever came anywhere close to getting the same success and recognition that Swan Song got. And I would argue nothing else was quite as aesthetically realized as it, either.

I'm not gonna beat off the bush here: Swan Song is a goddamn *gorgeous* visual novel with a flair that remains one-of-a-kind to this day. It forgoes the typical arrangement of sprites on backgrounds and occasional full-screen illustrations in favor of something that feels like a living, breathing, self-rearranging manga.

Text boxes slide on and off the screen in all sorts of shapes and sizes, perfectly adapted to the screen real estate and amount of text; character portraits sparsely accompany dialog to convey expressions to the reader without hiding too much of the background; comic panel-like inserts are used to set scenes and give context to events; and ever so sparingly are full screen illustrations used, often to incredible impact.

There's so much visual variety here and so much careful consideration as to how every single individual asset is used in a way you just *don't* see from visual novels, like… ever? As far as I'm

aware from talking to people who've worked in and around the industry, most graphics in VNs are pre-planned and created well ahead of the finalized scripts in order to fit around potential rewrites and changes during development, with very few being designed around specific story instances.

I have absolutely no clue what FlyingShine's project structure was like at the time of Swan Song; probably an absolute mess given what I know about another title of theirs, *Cross Channel*; but much like the previously covered 10/10 philosophical masterpiece that is *Cross Channel*, miracles happened, and we somehow got one of the rare studio VNs where every single bit of graphics feels deeply purposeful.

And on top of the flair that everything is utilized with, the actual raw quality of the 'everything' is top notch. Makoto's style feels to me like a more grounded version of Akio Watanabe's style, the artist best known for his work on *Popotan* and the *Monogatari* anime adaptations. [5] They have a similar kind of jagged, cartoonish-ness to the way they do their linework, and both have shading that at times feels glossy. But while Akio favors striking colors and imagery; and in fact, Makoto goes that route in the earlier Setoguchi game *Carnival*; they chose a far more down to earth look here.

Swan Song's palette favors darker tones and washed out colors, giving the game a moody atmosphere beautifully contrasted by the rare moments of bright warmth; a well lit gymnasium housing survivors, a campfire brightening up an otherwise moody room, a soft blush on a smiling face, and so forth. It feels appropriately apocalyptic and dark, without ever forgetting the human soul at the centre of the narrative.

Furthermore, everything else from anatomy to shot composition is just absolutely wonderful - the latter especially, hot damn. Creative usage of all sorts of angles, careful choices of aspect ratios and croppings of shots, great depth of field to separate the foreground and background and give clear subjects; it's a *very* impressive effort that goes far beyond the dutch angles and flat landscape shots you often see in VNs.

I honestly cannot criticize a single thing about Swan Song's visuals; it's just a beautiful game all around with an extremely unique and unmatched aesthetic, that really makes me wish Makoto was still working in the industry these days. They more or less vanished in the early 2010s following work on the little discussed *Himegoto Union* and its fan disc [4], with no one seeming to be sure of where they are now. Personally, given how rough the games industry is in my experience, I totally understand their decision to drop out all together - but man, I wish they were still around doing something.

A Pleasant Sound



Thankfully however, much of the rest of Swan Song's staff is still around and kicking, and that includes the musicians. Swan Song's score was composed by Funczion Sounds, a group with a *very* extensive track record in the industry, ranging from niche kink games all the way to critical darlings such as *Cross Channel* and *Yume Miru Kusuri*. [6] As one might expect from that, Swan Song's score is *really*, ***really*** good.

It's also used a bit… unconventionally, compared to other visual novels. Rather than have near-constant background music as is typical for the medium, Swan Song makes heavy usage of ambient sound to set the mood. The whistling of the wind, the light crackles of a fire, the crumbling of nearby buildings, the sound of footsteps in a snow storm… it's not something you see very often in VNs, but it's used to great effect and makes it all the more meaningful when music does show up.

With well over 20 tracks, Swan Song's score is beautifully atmospheric and diverse in tone, ranging from lamentable and hollow to comforting and soft. If I had to pick just *one tune* that represents the atmosphere of Swan Song as a whole however, it would be *Grief*; fitting to its name, it's a piece that feels as if it's mourning something lost, with a sorrowful woodwind lead playing over gently plucked arpeggios on the acoustic guitar in 6/8 time. Combined with soft

synth pads and choirs, and with evocative shifts in key and chord, it's one of the most memorable pieces, and a real highlight whenever it plays.

As much as I love that piece though, it would be criminal not to pay respects to anything else. From the dramatic strings and brasses of *Return* to the peaceful reminiscing of *Memories* and its relaxed beats, and from the tearjerking and climatic *Last Swan* to the mysterious and wistful synth pads of *Before Dawn*, Swan Song's score is by far one of the greatest parts of the game, and frankly some of the best work that Funczion Sounds has ever put out.

Likewise, the voice acting in Swan Song is another impressive part of its package, with an absolutely star-studded cast. Hokuto Minami [7] from *SubaHibi* and *Melty Blood*, Chiaki Takahashi [8] from *BlazBlue* and *Idolmaster*, Ozaki Jun [9] from *Kara no Shoujo* and *Inganock*, Nakata Junko [10] from *Sharin no Kuni* and *Da Capo*… you could pick damn near anyone from the massive cast list and land on a hit, it's *incredible*, and every single voice actor does an amazing job with their roles.

All of this; the strong premise, fascinating characters, interesting themes, beautiful artwork, and incredible sound; add up to make a seriously unforgettable experience that I cannot recommend to people enough. And in order to get into the deeper ideas the story expresses and my personal thoughts on them, I'm going to have to dive into some pretty deep spoilers.

While I don't think knowing details about Swan Song's story beforehand really ruins the experience given how much it lives in the moment to moment, I would still suggest skipping ahead to the end segment where I give my final thoughts if you're interested in playing this game unspoiled But before that, stick around just a bit longer for the Patreon break if you will, where I thank the people who make these videos possible, answer cool questions, and shout out people that you should check out!

Patreon Break

Greetings everyone, and welcome to the Patreon segment – that part of the video where I give life and channel updates, thank the folks who donate to make these videos possible, shout out people and things you should check out, answer questions, and other nice thingies of those sorts! For the first of those… well, thankfully, I don't have too much to report on; things have been going quite stable in my personal life, and YouTube's goin' actually rather well, with the last video being one of the best performing in the first few weeks of release. Seriously, thank you all so so much for that!

And a special thank you to everyone who donates to keep this channel going. As always, I am *incredibly* appreciative of every little bit of support that's given; with how fucky the state of the world and the economy is right now, especially as a trans woman living abroad without any higher education, I am really grateful for the opportunity to make these videos and stay afloat through them. This wouldn't exist without y'alls collective effort, so, again: thank you.

And to give back to the community that makes this possible, I'm gonna take a moment to shout out some cool people and things that *you* should check out - whether it's things I've stumbled onto myself and like, things I've been recommended by viewers, or things that have been suggested by viewers like you! And if you'd also like a chance at getting shouted out, or want me to shout something else out, then feel free to drop me a line by Tumblr, Bluesky, Email, or Patreon DMs: I'm always looking for cool new things to give much deserved attention to.

The first of the two things I'd like to mention here is actually a game that I contributed a piece of guest music to: Scene Reapers! It's a work in progress visual novel by PuppyBear Studios with a demo out now, about a person named Lita who gets turned into… basically a magical girl grim reaper. It's a fun premise backed up by entertaining writing, charming art, and a very, *very* early 2000s inspired aesthetic, all adding up to something that I would really recommend checking out if you're in the mood for an indie VN..

And as for the second shout out, I'd like to focus on the work of Rambi Ramblebable, who runs a YouTube channel called… well, Ramblebable, where she makes video essays on a variety of pop culture topics, with a specific focus on trans topics. Her latest video - subtitled After the Blue Pill - is an exploration of trans films through the lens of Gnostic ideas present within them; making some genuinely fascinating connections reads on films like The Matrix and I Saw The TV Glow. It's engaging, deeply personal, stylish as hell, and overall well worth the time it takes to watch.

Okay then, with those things hopefully stored in your mind palace to check out later, I'd like to take a moment to go through some of the Patreon questions backlog. Sooo, let's go do that now!

Hourai asks: "*Are there any characters whose existence ever dragged down a work for you? Not having a bad route like Wossername in Gun Katana; just that their presence at all was a negative?*"
I can't think of an exact example of this, but the weirdly transphobic character in Manakashi very much sours the entire experience once you know what's happening.

Hattie Chats asks: "*What was the first eroge that made you go 'the people have to know about this'?*"
Doukyuusei's remake is probably the first one that really blew me away in that regard, but a few other games like Gun-Katana and Suisenka also triggered that in me early on in this channel.

Elle C asks: "*Is there anything you're looking forward to as of late?*"

I honestly am bad at keeping up with news and announcements in general, so there isn't a whole ton I'm looking forward to at the moment. Though I have to say I'm quite curious about the remake of the Tsui no Sora remake, as well as the Gore Screaming Show remake.

Shrike asks: "*Are there any old videos you've already covered on the channel that you'd want to revisit, especially now that you seem to have a better grasp on Japanese?*"
SayoOshi is the big one that stands out, especially since people have brought up good points about it to me that have me considering a re-read… plus apparently the release I used butchers the scripting, so I feel sort of bad about that. Kanon is another one I'd like to do an addendum to as well, given that I think I judged it a bit unfairly going off of the messy fan translation.

Miss Choco Chip Asks: "*Given your expertise in Japanese, have you thought about becoming a VN translator before?*"
I've thought about it a few times, but to be honest, the industry sort of blows to work in from what I know, and translation isn't a skill I've honed or plan on honing. I can read well, I can examine things well, but I don't consider myself particularly good at faithfully taking things from one language to another at any reasonable speed. It seriously takes me *forever* to get translations I'm happy with for my videos. If I ever did anything, it'd be in an unofficial capacity.

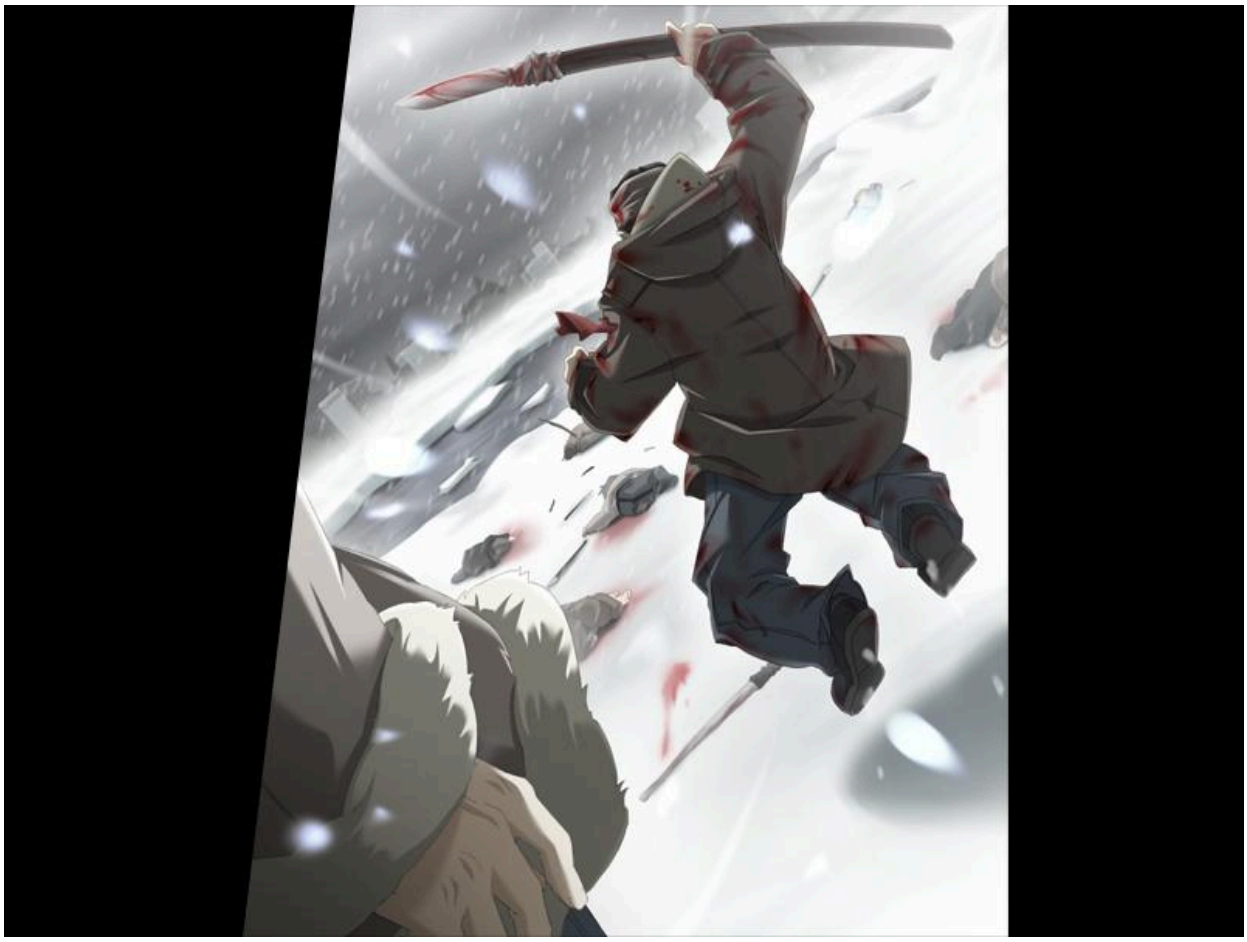
And finally, Kabakarika asks: "*Any chance we might see stuff like Evermaiden or Ignanock in the future? Or, really, more Liar-Soft joints in general?*"
I'm very much interested in going through more of their catalog over time, since they're probably one of the most unique eroge studios I can think of. Ever Maiden and Inganock are, in fact two in particular that've been on my radar for ages!

With that all said and done, I once again want to thank everyone who donates to make this all possible through Patreon and Ko-Fi, as I have never seen a single cent from YouTube for these videos, and likely never will given how this website is. So if you'd like to play a part in making this happen, see videos early, ask me questions, get monthly updates, suggest games to cover, and perhaps even more, then consider donating as little as one dollar a month to Patreon or Ko-Fi. Pay however much you want, when you want to, and enjoy all the benefits; and heck, if you just want to buy me a coffee or something, then you can donate one time via my PayPal or Ko-Fi!

But seriously, I appreciate all donations all the same, every little bit adds up to make this possible, and I do not take a bit of it for granted. And likewise, if you don't wanna donate and want to support in other ways, that's incredible too. Comments, subscriptions, likes, views, and *especially* sharing these videos with other people, are instrumental in making this channel possible, and I'm grateful for every little bit. So again: thank you so much… and let's get back to the show.

[SPOILERS] Human Nature & The End

A Brief Notice



Before we get too deep into the weeds of this all, let me reiterate the usual spoiler segment disclaimer: this part of the video is about my reads of the stories' themes and the plot needed to recap that, and is in no way a complete summary of Swan Song's story. Not only do I believe this game and really all games are best experienced on their own terms, and not me chewing it up and spitting it out for you like some sort of weird baby and momma bird kink sesh, but Swan Song as a game is quite resistant to being boiled down to a series of bullet points and lore details.

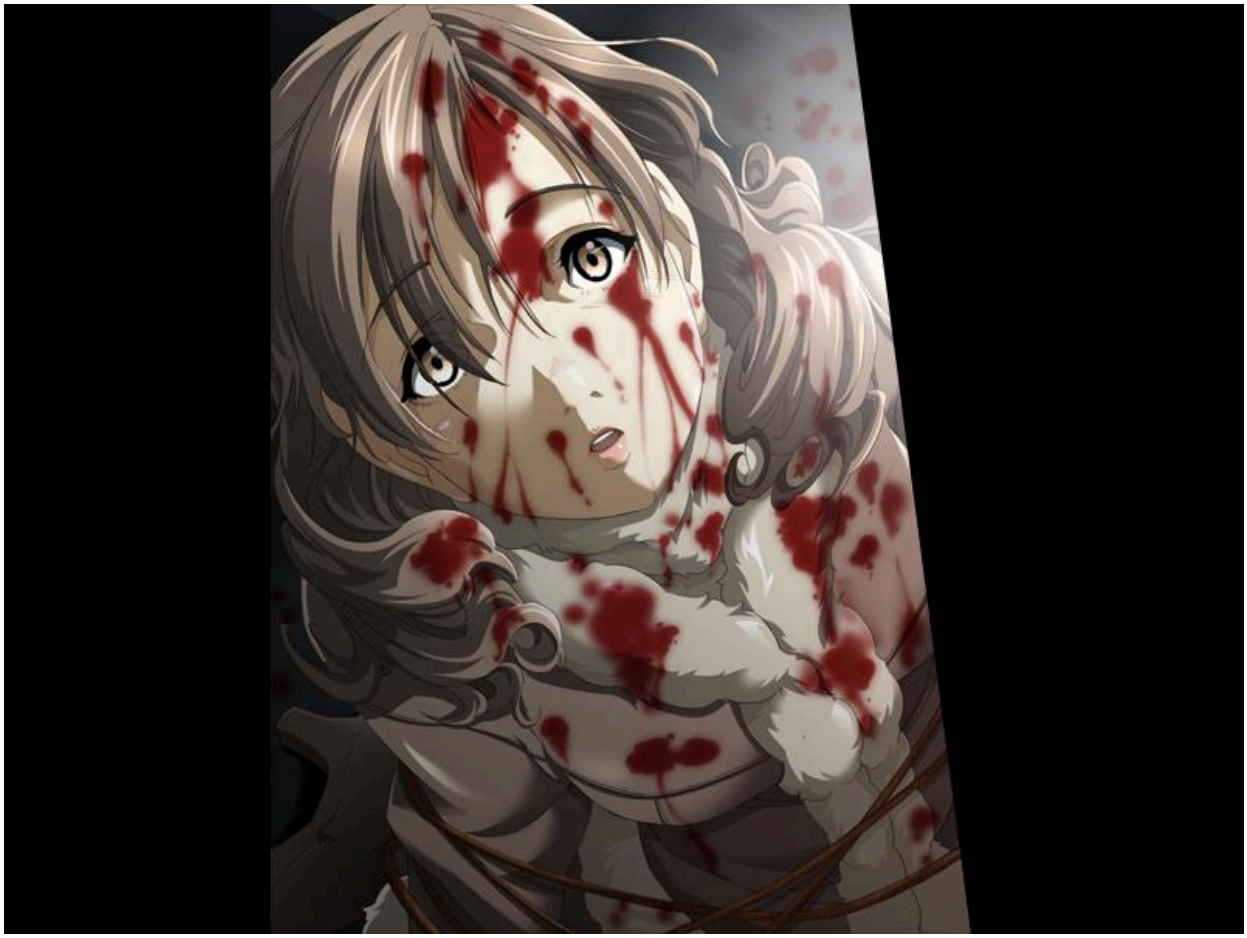
Swan Song's story lives and breathes in its unfolding; so many of its greatest moments occur within random musings that characters have, the quiet times where nothing but contemplation is happening, the dread of watching a tragedy unfold before your eyes, and so forth. Trying to convey that all through a video is not only a sisyphean effort, but it would distract from what I really want to do here: discuss the ideas the game provoked in my mind.

In my view, the overarching idea of Swan Song is the question of what defines human nature. With all social norms and structures stripped away, no laws left to govern the actions of people, no courts to decide who is right and wrong, people are left to decide for themselves what way is best to live – and how much they truly need to care for their fellow man. So, then, is the brutality that inevitably follows all of this a sign of our true animalistic depravity, or is it a product of the circumstances which came before?

While some choose to read this game as deeply pessimistic about human nature due to what happens within it, I hold strongly to the opposite view. I don't see Swan Song as a particularly uplifting or optimistic or happy work, and reading it definitely made me feel bummed out about this whole 'being human' thing at multiple points. But as I see it, the core philosophy of this game is that though humanity is beautiful, what we have created is anything but - and it makes no attempt to hide how our very own society corrupts us.

Atto Primo & Secondo

After the Catastrophe



In order to go into this and far more, we'll have to pick up from where we left off in the synopsis, with additional details as needed. After a massive natural disaster upends a small Japanese town, six survivors - Tsukasa, Tanomura, Takuma, Yuka, Hibari, and Aroe - band together to try and look for any others who may have taken refuge. Against seemingly all odds, they manage to brave the storm to a camp of some 300 people split across various buildings, managed primarily by a man named Hida Ryuutarou.

However, the cost for getting to that point wasn't nothing. Along the way, the group realized just how truly inhospitable the once quiet town had become: they were unable to save an innocent young girl from being killed under the weight of her own homes rubble, nearly lost their lives to corrupt former police officers who've embraced a life of kidnapping and murder, and saw first hand at the hospital camps just how devastating the disaster had been for people. Countless people; many corpses; lined up, unable to be saved by the few doctors who themselves are holding on by a mere thread.

All of it weighed heavily on the group, with only a few small solaces in-between providing relief. For Tsukasa and Yuka, this has come in the form of a budding relationship; the two having apparently met long ago at a piano recital, back when Tsukasa was following in his dad's footsteps and becoming a concert pianist, and before his right hand was irreparably damaged.

The relationship quickly evolves from mere chatter about the past however, and soon becomes sexual and romantic; cementing the two as a couple in this crumbling world… which is not quite to everyone's pleasure.

Hibari, Yuka's best friend, can more or less deal with her getting cozy with Tsukasa, even if his weirdly formal and distant mannerisms come off as odd to her. And besides, she has her own budding romance with Tanomura to contend with, even if she won't admit to having feelings for the goober. Takuma, however, seems to struggle quite a bit with the mere thought of this, as Yuka is pretty much the only friend he's ever had - and definitely the only woman he's ever been close to, having lived most of his life as a reclusive otaku, shunned by people around him for being ugly, creepy, and undesirable.

This is all on top of him seeming to struggle more than anyone else with what's happening in the world; cursing at multiple points the fact that innocent, 'sinless' people were horrifically murdered by a disaster far out of their control. And yet, despite it all, he still lives; a sad person who hates himself, barely holding together through inertia and the support of the other five around him.

Comparatively, the rest of the group seems affected and distraught by all that's happened, but still with the energy to push forward for the sake of those who are still alive - and Aroe in particular seems to not at all comprehend what's happened, still asking at times to see her older sister… even after seeing her corpse lined up with all the other unfortunate people.



After taking some time to recover from everything that's happened up until now, and after getting to know the people of the camp - who mostly house themselves in a gymnasium - the group begins to figure out their responsibilities and how they might be able to help: Yuka provides her cooking skills for everyone, Hibari tends to the children by playing with and keeping an eye on them, and Tanomura and Takuma provide general assistance and manpower – leaving just Aroe and Tsukasa without much to do.

The former is happy enough to just play with the kids, though Hibari does try her best to learn more about her and find her some sort of unique role. Tsukasa, though, goes around trying to find anything he can help with, beginning with a quick stop by the hospital and sick camps. There, he happens upon a meeting being held by one Dr. Toshihiko Kakizaki, a scraggly looking middle aged man who's taken a leadership role within the survivors camp medical staff.

Though the discussion is dry and brimming with medical terms too complex for Tsukasa, what he can ascertain is this: the situation is dire, and choices must be made as to who can be saved. There's no hope of saving everyone in these times, and emotions must be set aside. And unfortunately, Toshihiko himself is not spared from the cruelty of disease, as he suddenly falls ill the next day, collapsing right in front of Tsukasa's eyes in his office.

Having spotted something interesting in that room however, and looking for a way to make himself useful, Tsukasa offers to one of the nurses to watch over Toshiko and converse with him, much to what is at first his displeasure. But the conversation soon shifts in a different direction, when Tsukasa mentions he knows the classical music he was listening to in his room: and more specifically, the recording of it, which had been done by his father, Kazuki Amako.

This leads the two to begin discussing more of Tsukasa's past, led through the revelation that Toshihiko - having been faffing about Europe for a time following an early departure from the field of medicine - actually knew Tsukasa's father from his time in Europe. Kazuki, as it turns out, was not only a drunk serial cheater, but bailed on his own performances from time to time. And it was through this that Toshihiko had an opportunity to chat with him as a fellow Japanese man abroad, leading him to eventually be invited to one of Tsukasa's seldom few concerts, held in a dingy Vienna restaurant.



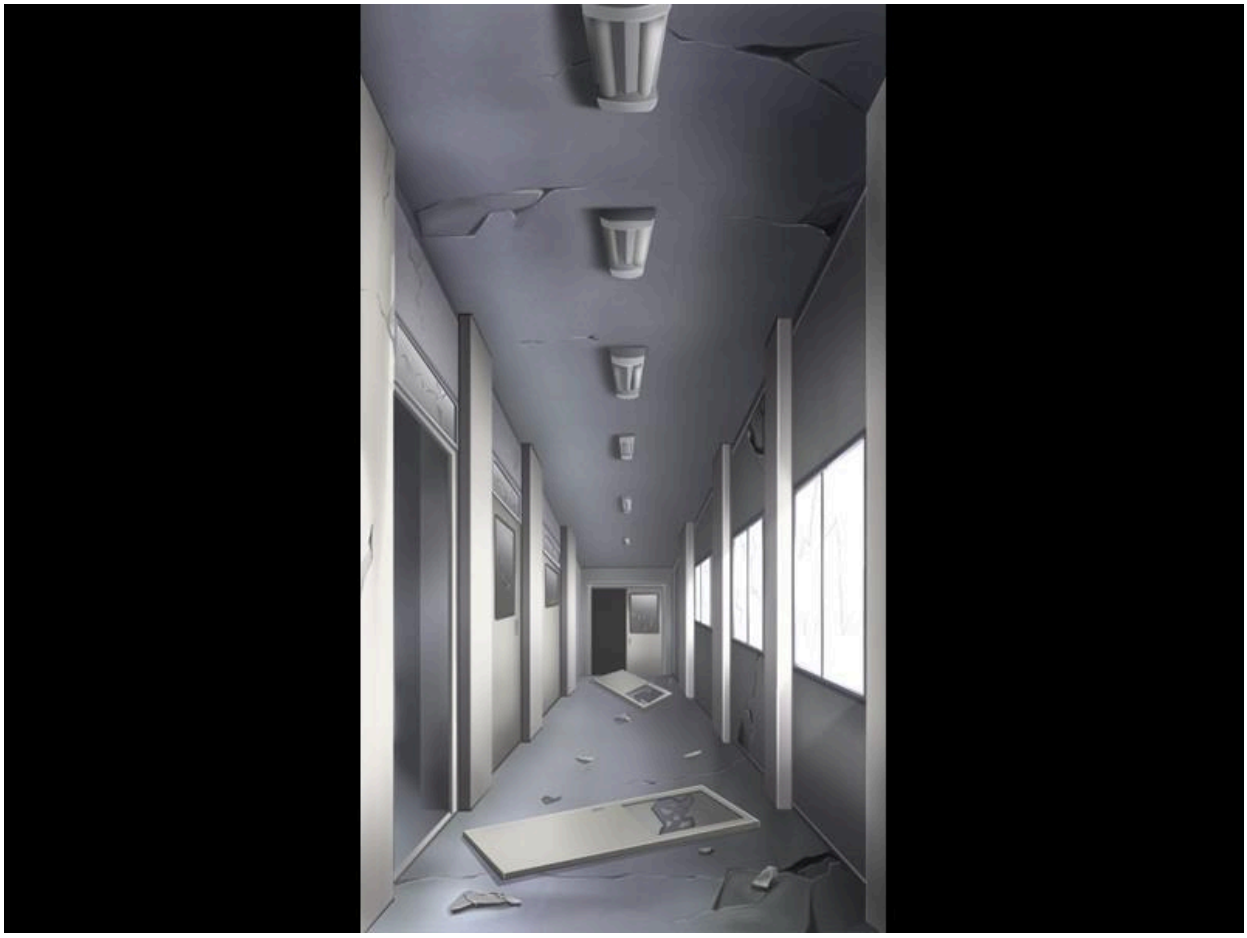
It was this little concert that changed the course of his life. The power of Tsukasa's playing turned him from a washout of a doctor who abandoned his work out of apathy, into someone who felt a drive to do good for others, *to make change.* The irony in this all, of course, being that Tsukasa gave up piano very shortly after this due to his sudden disability – what a cruel twist of

fate that all this time, Toshihiko had been inspired to move on by someone who themselves ‘gave up’ long ago.

With this lingering in his mind, Toshihiko asks to be alone while he recovers from his anemia, and Tsukasa obliges; deciding - perhaps because of what just happened - to go to the school building and begin practicing piano again, bumping into Yuka along the way. Not letting the opportunity slip, she opts to come with him to listen to his performance; a pleasant, gentle time of bonding, that reveals him to still be very well talented at his instrument of choice. At least, that’s what she says.

Though Tsukasa returns to the gymnasium following his practice, maybe hoping to get some rest, his attempts are quickly disrupted by sudden murmurings about something happening outside: some mysterious people have come from the outside and started a fire in the hospital building, not only rendering it unusable… but killing the sickly Toshihiko in the process.

Tsukasa, alongside Tanomura and Takuma as hidden backup, go to find the culprits; but instead of finding thieves they’d seen before like the scummy police officers, they instead find a group of other men surrounding a woman, named Taeko Nogi. Despite how things appear, the men attest that they were victims at the scene of the crime, and soon disperse, leaving just Taeko and Tsukasa’s group behind. Though she doesn’t commit to coming back to the camp with them, she nevertheless thanks them for the invitation, and passes something along to Tsukasa as he leaves: the CD his father had recorded…



This whole sequence is one of the first parts of Swan Song that really, truly got to me in a way I wasn't expecting. The tragic moments up to this point and the pieces of character backstories struck chords with me, absolutely, but a lot of that was more in the sense of seeing a greater tragedy unfolding. This moment is much more deeply personal, and hit on something I think about a lot.

Something that is almost always on my mind as I create… *anything*, is the potential that art has to affect people and inspire good in their lives. I'm not an idealist or extreme optimist who believes it will change the world by itself, but I do believe in how it can inspire individual change in ways that the original artist can never predict. Like, I really don't think the developers of most games I cover even know I exist, and likely could have never imagined that 20 years down the line, some trans woman born in the US that lives in Brazil would have their life irrevocably altered by a story they wrote at the beginning of their career.

And yet, here I am anyway; so profoundly moved by words on a screen that I write thousands upon thousands of words every single month about them, hoping to bounce off those works to create something of my own that might yet again inspire change in somebody. I create these videos in hopes of reaching people and maybe, in some way, making change in this world that I might never get to see. I don't know how what I create will affect people 5 seconds, 5 minutes, 5

hours, 5 years, 5 decades from watching them, but I keep myself going, in part, by the hopes of being an ember in a far greater flame.

Tsukasa's interaction with Toshihiko captures this, and the deeply personal tragedy of his source of inspiration turning out to be nothing like he imagined, brilliantly. We don't know much of anything about the doctor in the roughly decade long period between his return to medicine and the apocalypse happening, but there's no doubt given the knowledge he shows earlier on that he has an immense amount of skill, and has likely saved a lot of people. None of that would have happened without Tsukasa.

And yet, this imagined version of him; the virtuoso pianist who studied under a friend of his; only existed for a brief period. It would be wrong to say that Toshihiko's entire motivation to return to medicine was a lie, but it must feel like that, and it must be crushing to meet your idol and know they're nothing like you thought in a way which is so… banal. He's just a guy, and nothing more, and nothing less. I cannot deny I've thought of how my own future may color my present work, and if people would mourn the loss of what I create; what could have been; if I choose another field, something less 'exciting.'

The fact these difficult questions exist at all however, I think is symbolic of just how much people care about what others create, and how much power creation holds. And for the sake of preserving my sanity, that what I personally choose to focus on – as painful and weighty as these reminders of how other people see artists can be, they are also reminders that they matter, that creating *matters*. Tsukasa, I believe, realizes this after talking with Toshihiko, and goes back to the piano because of it.

It's a grounded discussion that clearly signals Swan Song's desire to focus on the individual, even in something as grand in scale as the apocalypse. Rather than treat even fairly unimportant cast members as mere plot threads, cannon fodder for the heroes' journeys of others, it makes their struggles and histories feel meaningful – a reminder that we are far more connected to each other than we realize.

Downfall



This focus only grows stronger from here, as the plot begins to take a darker turn with Takuma. Up to this point in the story, he's mostly been working odd jobs for people while taking time to himself to contemplate things: primarily, how much he despises his life and himself, clinging onto the hope that perhaps him and Yuka could get together eventually, and holding on to his *very* strong, black and white moral convictions about people.

They're things that by themselves are… off-putting, but not necessarily disasterous. But the flaws in his mindset start to become *very* clear at an otherwise fun and enjoyable party for group morale, when he gets piss drunk and begins to ramble on about his life and philosophy; how the world is unequal because he doesn't have a girlfriend, how school and society is pointless and empty, and how all he's wanted this entire time is for someone to tell him that it's fine to be the trash that he is.

With everyone cheering him on, though seemingly with a sense of ironic pity that he doesn't pick up on, Takuma finds himself with a renewed energy and vigor: his days of crying are over, now are his days of living for blessings and happiness like everybody else! Even if the world is cruel, he shall not desist, and in fact, must lead the masses who have forgotten their wishes for happiness in this world! Even after he passes out drunk and wakes up forgetting half of what happened, he still feels as if he's been changed.

Deciding to go out for a quick leak, he catches sight of Tsukasa in the school window; that frustratingly stylish, elegant, and eccentric man who's got all the blessings that girls love; unlike him, who was cursed with bad looks and born to be hated. Though he does his best not to get lost in his self-loathing and instead goes to talk with him, he's met with an odd surprise that throws his entire night off: Tsukasa and Yuka having sex together.

If there was any doubt before, there no longer is: the two are together, as if - in Takuma's mind - God was playing a sick, cruel prank on him. Leaving with a heavy stomach, he soon meets Tanomura outside, who's unable to do much of anything to cheer him up; spending the whole rest of the night behaving awkwardly around everybody while putting on a mask of happiness, with Hibari being the only person to rightfully call him out as acting like a bit of a creep.

The only thing that breaks up his sad state of affairs is a meeting on the state of fuel supplies, as recent thefts have brought into question not only how to ration what's left, but just who stole the supplies in the first place. Tanomura and Takuma are sent out to investigate - the former hoping for a peaceful solution if it all possible, and the latter being thirsty for revenge against the crooks.

With some luck and skill, the two manage to find the thieves, some of whom… have taken to torturing an innocent woman. Unable to overlook this act of cruelty, Tanomura goes for support while Takuma waits for a chance to strike, questioning where to go from here. Can he really take someone down? How does he even go about removing this filth from the Earth before they murder a defiled, innocent woman? Could he simply walk away from this all for his own safety, or would he be left with a guilty conscience?

Unable to handle it any longer, and seeing a chance to attack, Takuma rushes in and strikes one of the men; stabbing a piece of metal into his back that leaves him bleeding and screaming for mercy on the ground. Terrified, but unable to stop, Takuma holds his ground until Tanomura is able to step in and knock out the remaining people, thankfully without grave injuries. With the crisis averted; even with one man dead; Takuma and Tanomura leave with a few hostages in hand… and bring the scared woman with them to somewhere safer.



Days later, the incident involving Takuma stirs intense division within the survivors camp. Though anyone can agree that what occurred was horrific and inexcusable, people debate whether or not it was right for the man to be killed, and what is best done with the prisoners. Confinement? Death penalty? Release with a warning? Who even has the right to decide, most especially when the victim is living within the same camp?

Hibari, frustrated in trying to discuss this with Tsukasa and Yuka - who are both conflicted on it all - tries to pass time by talking with others and caring for the kids in the camp, but ultimately finds no semblance of solace until far later in the day. After an elongated nap, she finds herself sitting next to Tanomura, and truly opens up to him for the first time: she wonders, just what kinds of people those thieves were before all this.

They must have been normal kids; with a mom and a dad, who lost things at school, who played the recorder, who attended PE, so… why did they turn to this? Is there no chance for a change of heart? Given that, as Tanomura says, we can't look inside other peoples hearts, we can't really say – but it would be nice to trust in them like that.

However, not everyone is so open, and it appears that public opinion is favoring execution. As Tsukasa remarks the following day, the site of the deed has become quite a site of spectacle for

people, and Hibari finds this out first hand when she walks by there as she's playing with the kids, and hears one of the apprehended men - tied up - screaming for mercy, swearing he'll never do something horrible again.

Unable to bear listening to it, she responds to him and tells him that it's his fault for doing something so horrible. And that, he doesn't deny, but he tries to explain why it happened; his nerves were frayed, he faltered in a moment of weakness while in hell itself, having seen countless people die all around him. All he wants now is one more chance, and to be allowed to live for that chance. Distressed, Hibari runs away, and goes to bed, trying to sleep the pain of the day away.



It's here we see one of the most fascinating thematic threads of Swan Song start to come to fruition: justice and redemption. Who is allowed to administer justice? What kind of justice is acceptable to administer? And what leads someone to their opinions about right and wrong? These become incredibly important questions from here on, especially as Takuma begins his descent into cold, militaristic logic.

Nothing accelerates this further than what happens with the woman he and Tanomura saved, Nozomi Koike – a victim of an abusive household who fled, soon after abducted by the

opportunistic thieves. Takuma muses with surprising clarity and accuracy for once, that the world had reduced her for a time to nothing more than an object to abuse, the role of a victim – her past fading to nothingness in the face of inhuman abuse that still haunts her.

And, he supposes, that is perhaps how it is for everyone now. The lives that everyone was living up until the moment of the earthquake have vanished into thin air; what's left are mere victims, picking up from nothingness with their previous joys and purposes gone. But while he can do nothing for the vast majority, Koike *is* somebody he's able to help. And she more or less demands it, insisting that she owes him for saving her, and asks him to accompany her and tell her whether or not something is wrong, rotting, putrid, with her body.

Takuma, against all odds, is able to give her some semblance of comfort; and from inside him, a sense of pride wells up in having been *useful* to somebody. Koike truly believes in him, because he did something to relieve her suffering even if she should have never suffered to begin with. In his mind, it's those bastards who hurt her that should suffer; not only for what they did to her, but everyone else they've hurt. They deserve more than death; they, as humans, deserve to take responsibility for their actions… and if he has to force them himself, he will.

As he heads to the old school house, a perfect situation for exactly that presents itself: two men have fled, and Takuma takes it upon himself to get them, eventually managing to catch one of them off-guard, and beat him damn near to death. But unfortunately for him, he gets taken off-guard by another man sneaking up behind him, when Tsukasa walks onto the scene.

With Takuma being bloodied to a pulp, and Yuka and Aroe having left just before Tsukasa, one of the men grabs Yuka in a panic and runs off with her, leaving Tsukasa to run after him while the other is once apprehended anew. With haste, he manages to catch up with him, and stop him before he can do anything to Yuka… but not without a fight, ending with the man being gravely injured, and Yuka splattered in blood.

Though both are unnerved, they both manage to hold themselves together – Tsukasa perhaps less so than Yuka, who tells her, "*what died over there, it looks like me. It looks like I died, right? It feels like that, like I died too. I don't know… do you get what I'm trying to say?*" Though he insists they look at the dead body to verify who it is, Yuka ultimately talks him down, and the two return to camp. With the man dead, and the other two killed by lethal injection, the camp is once again safe… but at what cost?

Turning Point



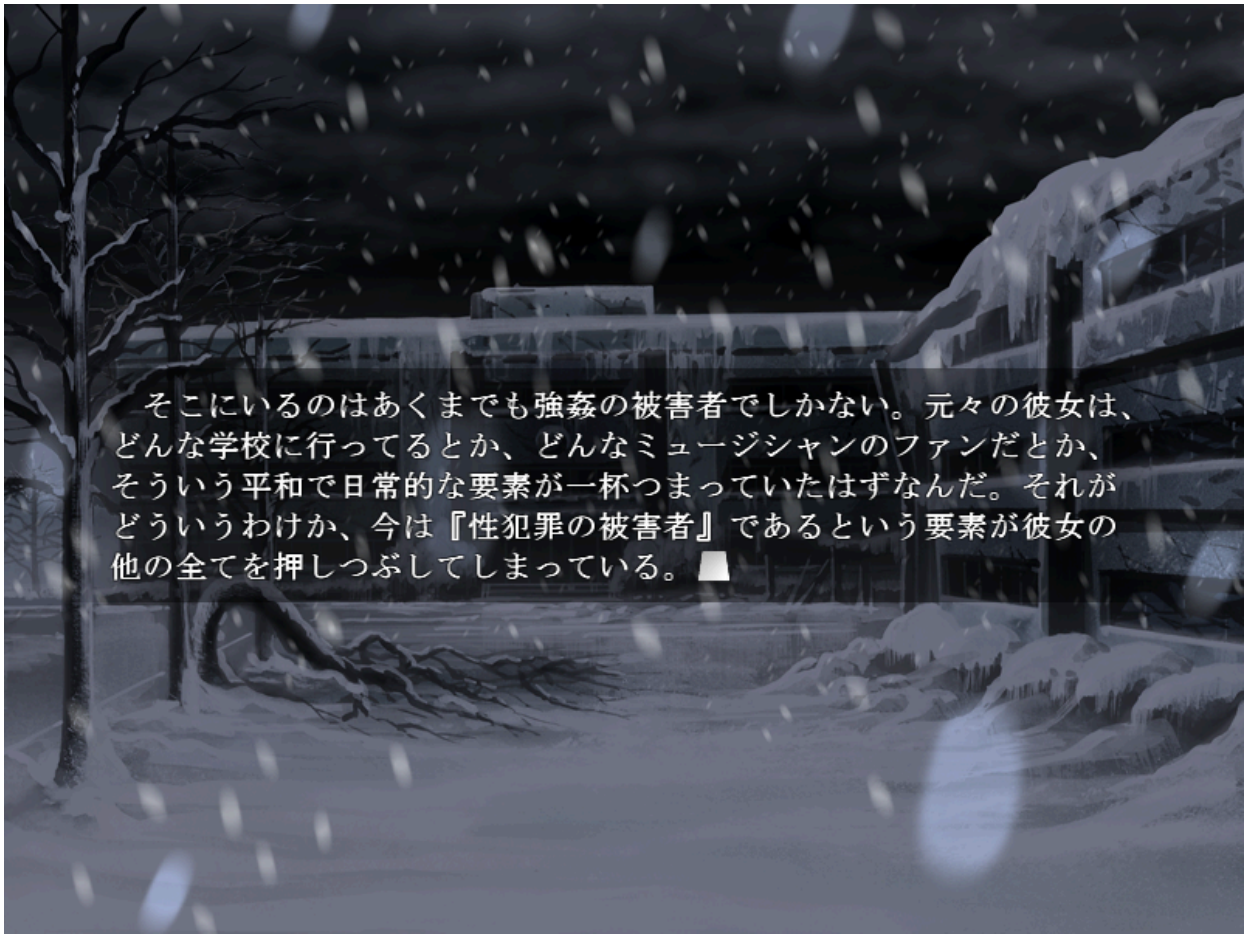
This segment marks the halfway point of Swan Song's story, and is where the narrative *really* starts to shine, as everyone begins to feel the weight of the world on their shoulders and reacts in different ways. What I think best symbolizes this is everything involving Takuma and Koike, as the beginning of their dynamic is deeply fraught in ways that can be surmised, but don't immediately present themselves.

The best example of this is Takuma's monologue on victimhood. His lamentations on Koike as a survivor of abuse manage to pin-point a very real social phenomena, while also revealing his own self-centeredness as he too falls into that phenomena. Takuma correctly recognizes that when someone is abused in some way or form, whoever they are before that almost… disappears in the eyes of many people, including in the victims own eyes.

To paraphrase him, '*whatever school she went to, whatever musicians she liked, all of the elements in her ordinary and peaceful daily life have been trampled over by the part of her that is now a rape victim.*' And he isn't wrong in a broader social sense. People have a tendency to treat victims of abuse as objects and examples rather than full people; instances of human cruelty being done to a person, rather than a person.

This is only further exacerbated by what being a survivor feels like anyways. While I'm sure the perception added immensely to this, just the trauma of abuse alone has led me to live a lot of my life with depression and anxiety and suicidality coloring every single thing I do; unable to imagine for even a second on some days what it must be like to live without this weight, to live without seeing yourself - as Koike describes herself - as dirtied, as putrid, as *rotting*.

It's such a visceral and poignant description in a way I've never seen before. Her whole character really, as we'll see going forward, is a really fascinating depiction of someone who gets stuck in a horrible situation with horrible people after being taken advantage of, with Takuma being the primary person who consistently leads her along and hurts her further.



As out of place as that might seem for a man who spent minutes delivering a monologue about victims in society, consider what's in that monologue that I haven't mentioned yet. As profound as it is with recognizing how victims are treated in the world, he's not saying a lot of it from the perspective of someone who *disagrees* – he too thinks to himself what a poor little thing she is, and how great it would be if *he* could be the one to save her from her sad, undeserved fate, and how much he wants to take revenge on those evil people who did this to her, seemingly without even asking if that's what *she* wants.

I didn't catch just how off-putting this whole thing was until I re-read it after finishing the game, and it became *very* apparent to me how he sees Koike as little more than the kind of object he proclaims to wish she was not. He laments the misery of how people have been reduced to victims, yet more or less uses her as a victim to boost his own ego. It's an opportunity to feel *useful* as a person, to vindicate his beliefs about sin and punishment, to have permission to be upset at something that embodies what he feels is the injustice of the world.

And he is right to be upset about what happened; the assault of Koike is horrific and fucked up in indescribably disgusting ways. *Anybody* would be upset – but Takuma channels his anger in a genuinely dangerous way, and becomes radicalized through it. He holds onto that frustration and uses it as justification to smite people he even vaguely suspects of disagreeing with his sense of black and white morality. You do bad things, you deserve bad done to you; an eye for an eye.

This, then, begs the question: is he right? Is this actually going to solve anything? As we know from Hibari briefly talking to one of the men, their situation was fucked – they were likely normal people who got suddenly surrounded by death and decay and destruction, and resorted to anything they could to survive and have a brief moment of power in a time of powerlessness. People broadly want power when they feel like they have none, but men especially are taught *by society* to seek it at the cost of others; and those others are usually the marginalized.

This is not to excuse what they did, but to make sense of their actions we can ultimately ask some important questions: should these people be allowed a second chance? Not necessarily forgiveness or understanding, but should it be recognized they were dealt a horrific hand, did a horrific thing, and subsequently, be given another opportunity under better circumstances to do better?

This idea is part of the basis of restorative justice; the belief that justice is best served through prioritizing the needs of victims and their feelings, then understanding the motives of and the effects on the criminal, in hopes of creating equitable punishment, long lasting change, and reconciliation [11]. It's gotten more popular over time, especially as the issues with court and carceral systems - with their retributive justice - have become increasingly clear to people. [12]

It takes quite a while for Swan Song's ideas on this to develop fully, but even at this point, I feel it does a genuinely good job at showing how this is not an easy or even always acceptable idea to put into practice. We have a group of people who've likely been raised with very toxic ideas of social hierarchies placed into a horrific situation, and we have someone who has been horrifically affected by this in a way that no one seems to truly grasp. The perpetrators can't just run free, not especially with the victim around, but one can reasonably argue they shouldn't be murdered for a mistake made under intense pressure. So… what do you do?

As someone who has thought a lot about this type of dilemma due to their own experiences with abuse, I feel like I land quite firmly on the side of attempting to create genuine change as opposed to just locking people away. I don't think I can ever forgive the people who have

assaulted me, who have used me up and discarded me, who have treated me like I was nothing more than an object to abuse – but I also can't bring myself to believe that they deserve death, and are beyond change. Nor do I believe they're an isolated incident, and that the world's ills will go away simply by throwing them to the brig.

People hurt others for as many reasons as there are ways to be hurt, and many of them stem from larger community issues rather than innate personal issues. Society encourages dominance and power, hierarchies and 'us vs. them' thinking, discrimination and abandonment, and far more. Put more simply, people are not innately evil, but they are molded that way. And do you really believe you can stop that simply by tossing the ones who were unlucky in a cell? That the fires in front of you are the only ones you have to smother, while you ignore the lit forest raging behind your back?

I don't think that can ever be the case. Swan Song recognizes this, and it knows that any answer it provides will be incomplete. Instead, it asks the reader to genuinely consider the humanity of these people; to consider who the victim was before and after this, and how they will be perceived; to consider who the criminals were before and after this, and how this cruelty can actually be stopped. And something else it recognizes, is that the people who step in after the fact, are often just as questionable as the perpetrators themselves…

Atto Terzo

Daichi



Following the execution of the thieves, the situation at the survivor camp changes for the worse. At least one person, unable to bear it all, has taken her own life. Fresh food is gone and what remains are stable supplies like rations. Outside contact has still yet to appear. And a police-like organization called the Vigilante Corps has been formed by Hida in order to keep the camp safe, with Tanomura elected by popular opinion as the unit's leader.

The only positive thing in all this - which is arguable at any rate - is that Takuma has more or less recovered from his injuries. Unfortunately, he now looks like incel Solid Snake. He's also apparently been dedicating most of his time to the efforts of the Vigilante Corps, believing strongly in their cause to an extent that's legitimately concerning.

Still, the latest item of worry for the group has been murmurings of a cult named the 'Daichi Society,' led by the mysterious Master Ryuugejyu; a New Religion that both Hibari and Koike have ties to. Though Takuma is immediately disinterested in communicating with them, Tanomura and Hida are more willing to give them some slack. After all, you can't judge a book by its cover, even if that book is cult propaganda.

And thus, the two travel out the next day with other Vigilante Corps members, eventually being seated with a lady named Aya Hoshino. She explains to them that she too has heard rumors of

other survivors, as well as of an incident that occurred involving one of their members: Nozomi. It turns out her mother whom she fled from is a member of this cult, leading Takuma to start questioning what kind of horrible life she had up until this point - and why the hell they didn't go after her when she fled.

Tanomura, through his sharp skills, manages to prevent the situation from becoming too hostile, and leaves with a chance at cooperation – much to Takuma's chagrin, who believes any association with a bunch of 'cultists freaks' will be a net negative for the camp. That conviction only grows stronger when, as they're walking out, they happen to meet with the corrupt police officers who once nearly killed them, yet have apparently 'reformed' and are seeking a better life under the guidance of Ryuugejyu.

Takuma, against Tanomura's better wishes, tries to rat the past misdeeds of the 'insane murderers' out to Aya - who makes it clear she already knows about all of this. Ryuugejyu has the power to see into the future, and if Ryuugejyu sees there is no trouble with these people, then there shall be none. If they wish to be accepted as people, then they shall be; it is no place of the Society to administer justice.



Returning to the camp, the group makes their report to Hida. Though Takuma speaks with a vehement, fuming hatred of the cult which was apparently once a fortune telling scam, Tanomura and Hida both take a more lenient stance. Though Hida understands concerns over things like their potential influence on group members, he stands firm that - as another bunch of people trying to brave the apocalypse - they have not done anything necessarily wrong.

Clearly, a fracture is forming in the camp; those who are willing to make alliances with unlikely friends, and those who are unwilling to compromise with so-called ‘maniacal cultists.’ Very few people seem to sit in the middle in all this, though Tsukasa is one of them; as a man who’s killed, he doesn’t feel much room to judge them for housing killers, though he’s clearly not a fan of cultish beliefs, either. Hibari as well has conflicted feelings, not necessarily seeming to despise them but definitely uncomfortable given they had taken over the lives of her parents, and damn near had a grip on her life as well.

Daichi Society doesn’t necessarily help their perception as a dangerous group either, and only further proves it later that night when the survivors’ group dinner is suddenly interrupted by a commotion at their gate. An older lady, followed by a massive group, has come demanding that her daughter Koike be released from people she calls a bunch of heretical murderers.

For as much as she demands however, Koike refuses to return, and becomes increasingly frustrated that her mother is insulting the very people who saved her from being killed, the people who accepted her after she fled the cult. Both sides; deeply emotional and unable to reach any compromise; leave the night upset, as the mother swears death on the disgusting sinners, and Nozomi cries to Takuma, profusely apologizing for her mother.



This encounter is what lights a primed fire, as over the following days, the morale of the camp continues to get worse and worse, and hostilities towards the Daichi Society grow greater in conflict; fights break out over who has access to what resources and where, with multiple people killed. Some members even flee for the church, only worsening tensions. Hida - a rare voice of reason - suddenly and mysteriously falls ill, leading Tanomura and Takuma to have greater responsibility for the time being.

With Takuma refusing to back down on his antagonistic positions, Tanomura takes it upon himself to go to the congregation and figure out some sort of peace agreement. But whatever good may have come of that is squandered long before it could be realized, as Takuma disobeys direct orders that same night by brutally murdering a cult member trying to pilfer the same market as him, intentionally provoking him into a fight as an excuse. Not as if he needed one anyways, as in Takuma's own words, "*he was a man that was supposed to die somehow.*"

The next day, the news breaks out, and any hope of reconciliation goes out the window, as Tanomura's effort is met with an apparently quite nasty letter. And as if things could not get any worse, Aroe runs away that night while out with Hibari. Though Tsukasa attempts to chase after her in the brutal snow storm, he has no luck before he's almost buried alive and rendered unconscious. And when he next wakes up… he finds himself inside of the Daichi Society's

temple, being cared for after sustaining serious damage to his legs. He may be safe, and so is Aroe too as it seems, but in what some would consider enemy territory.

As a silver lining, this provides a rare opportunity for someone outside of the Daichi Society to learn who and what the society is, as Tsukasa is soon beckoned to meet with Ryuugejyu's mother… and Ryuugejyu themselves, who turns out to be none other than Taeko, the woman he saw while trying to track down the hospital arsonists, and who rejected being a part of the survivors camp.

Taking on the mantle of the wise leader, she explains to Tsukasa their belief system: the world exists within an equilibrium, and over time, that equilibrium has lost its balance due to the foolish and destructive actions of humans. The disaster that occurred was not only inevitable as punishment for our failures, but something the society had actually predicted *well* in advance, perhaps proof alone that their religion is true. And according to them, salvation from this cruel world of suffering exists, found in the three holy scriptures that God - which their religion refers to as the buddhist figure Maitreya - has given to them.

Though Tsukasa struggles to make sense of all their new age jargon, one thing is made explicitly clear: he is uniquely important to them as the one who is meant to impregnate Ryuugejyu, and lead to the rebirth of Maitreya. Why he's uniquely capable of this is something that they refuse to explain, but to them his comprehension, and pre-existing relationship with Yuka, don't matter - he shall be held captive until he agrees. And so begins his long time of recovery, and resistance against the desires of the Daichi Society.



With the church now having kidnapped two members, and apparently refusing cooperation, tensions have grown worse in the camp. The only sign of hope is the Daichi Society being willing to perform a hostage exchange – Tsukasa and Aroe for the people that the Vigilante Corps is holding. While Tanomura is cautiously willing to accept the offer, it's already clear Takuma is more than willing to kill; he's already taken to beating the prisoners like circus animals, believing that his stress relief is worth more than their care and safety.

Unfortunately, Tanomura's inclination towards caution - and Takuma's antagonism - prove to be right when both sides go to the designated exchange site. Though Tanomura attempts to be peaceful initially, it soon becomes clear the church has come with the goal of war… and fighting quickly breaks out. The battle is brutal and quick, with Vigilante Corps members - especially Takuma - delighting in the glory, jumping for joy as a sea of corpses lay in the snow. After all, in his words - if they may just die tomorrow, why not have some fun?

Tanomura, mortified at the monster next to him, knows at this point that Takuma is too far gone; changed from a shy and fearful introvert to a gleeful murderer with a bloody ideology. And as he soon learns, he's infected the entire camp with his militaristic beliefs, as Tanomura comes back from a quick break on the rooftops with Hibari to discover that Hida has suddenly died… and in

no way by natural causes. Somebody, as the syringe on the ground of his bedroom gives away, gave him a lethal injection to remove opposition.

And who else would be responsible but Takuma? Tanomura confronts him on this immediately, and with the correct presumption that Takuma intends to kill him, too - in fact, for a long time now, the Vigilante Corps has been conspiring against him, frustrated with his pacifistic ways. Unfortunately for them however, Tanomura is able to successfully knock out everyone sent to assassinate him; leaving just the two of them alone together.

Rather than kill Takuma however, just as Takuma had planned to do to him… Tanomura leaves him alive, even as he begs to be killed if his pitiful existence means anything. Tanomura doesn't want revenge, he doesn't want to take over this camp. He knows Takuma has won everyone over right now, and that there'd be no point in ending him. He merely wishes to flee here, knowing he will never be welcomed again. Takuma is still, to the very bitter end, his friend - and for that, he deserves mercy.

Right before he goes to leave however, Tanomura makes one final move, and calls out to Hibari. Drenched in blood, expecting nothing, he confesses his love to her – and against all odds… Hibari accepts it, apparently having had a crush on him for a good while, even if she wouldn't admit it. And with this, bratty as always, she walks off with him; the two now alone together, looking to pave a path forward in this apocalypse.



Unfortunately, the circumstances fail to improve in any meaningful way. On the side of the Daichi Society, Tsukasa is still being held hostage with no hope of freedom, sans capitulating to their needs. He does, at least, learn from talking with Taeko that far back in the past, there was a swamp in the middle of the city very similar to the one that formed after the earthquake – hinting that what's happened now may be part of a geological pattern.

On the side of the survivors camp, the Vigilante Corps is gearing up for battle and preparing to execute hostages; with very little resistance across the board, it seems. Takuma of course is leading all of these charges, having completely given into his bloodlust – even his 'beloved' Koike, whom he once treated with something resembling respect, is now nothing more than a sex object to him, while she sincerely loves him.

All of this reaches a head on one fateful night. Internally, the Daichi Society knows what's coming to them. This entire time, Ryuugejyu and her mother have known all of this is a farce, and argue over whether or not to reveal the truth behind the Daichi Society to the people who have so innocently believed in it, with Taeko feeling she has a responsibility to stop lying to these people, and her mother believing she is doing them good by feeding them the lies of a beautiful, foolish dream of co-existence. Ultimately, she capitulates, and decides to call the followers to one final holy stand – just as Takuma's people march on.

In the end, both sides meet, ready for war. The battle is swift and brutal; countless people in the Vigilante Corps are burnt alive and pierced with spears, but the few who remain are enough to maim and desecrate everyone at the site of the battle. Takuma, at last, has won: the disgusting, *inhuman* freak cultists are dead, their women are raped, their men are killed, their children unable to reproduce their ideology. To him, it's only a shame that some seem to have survived - such as Ryuugejyu… and the camps former friends..

No Return



It's at this point that we've reached Swan Song's 'point of no return.' Tsukasa is separated from Yuka and presumably stranded on his own with Aroe. The Daichi Society has been reduced to rubble over ideological disputes, significantly weakening the strength of humans in the area. Tanomura and Hibari have fled a camp which has usurped full control over the area. And Takuma has fully embraced his destructive ideology, turning into a fascistic, militarist warlord, thirsty for blood.

I've seen some people say that the turn his character takes in particular is unrealistic or extreme, but if you go back and look at how he talks throughout this entire game, it's *incredibly* clear his belief system was always primed to go this way. He sees people as either good or bad, he believes he's *owed* things like a girlfriend just because that's 'fair,' he refuses to see depth in people's actions, and he despises the idea of cooperating with people that don't line up with his belief systems.

Takuma is not some one-note cartoonish depiction of a warlord – his narrative perspective actually allows us to understand *why* he's become this on a deeper level. The portrait his narration paints is of a genuinely sad and lost man, who wasn't given a life that fit the generic societal idea of what he should be – he's emotional, lanky, nervous, awkward, and above all, scared. He's spent his entire life being bullied and given shit for who and what he is, and in response, hates himself. He feels powerless, worthless, and disgusting.

As a billion other people more experienced in the field than I am… these are the kinds of people who are most likely to turn to destructive ideologies, in hopes of being told that they have a place in the world, and being able to roleplay being important [13]. Rather than actually interrogate the structures that designate him as all of these undesirable things, he instead plays further into them the *second* he's given a chance to be on the top of the totem pole. It's the oppressed reproducing oppression, which is not a natural result of oppressed people gaining power – it's a result of them being denied, unable, and even at times *unwilling* to imagine better.

And in some ways, I understand how people come to this. I also used to be a nervous little ball of self-hate in my teens, frustrated with myself, with the world, with my environment; everything. I was never on the far right; and in fact, was deeply frustrated the only group of friends I had online at the time were falling that way; but I was a 'centrist' who never actually interrogated anything around me outside of very shitty frameworks. As a result, I didn't know how to deal with my queerness, my neurodivergency, my… *anything*, besides frustration and self-hatred.

But over time, I talked with more people who helped me get out of my shell; I found people who cared about me as me, who were legitimately kind, who saw the world as more than a dull hellscape that rejected anyone who wasn't perfectly 'normal.' I found people who helped me imagine more than society presented. And that's snowballed over time into a greater and greater empathy for not only others of all strides, but for myself.

Takuma's issue - well, *one* of his issues - is very well symbolized by him wishing to be told that he can be trash. While he's right that it is, he never ever interrogates what trash *is* in the context of society. He can recognize that things are wrong, but the only framework he can think within is the one he's presented, that there are people who are born lucky and can dominate, and those who are born unlucky and cannot dominate - and as such, when given the chance to be the latter, he revels in it. Perhaps even more so than those given better starting odds, because his earlier persecution makes him feel as if he is uniquely gifted.

This, to me, is a genuinely fantastic portrayal of what creates an incel, a red piller, or whatever zoomer lingo you want to use for Takuma, because it captures something that can create this kind of person in the first place. It's a complex interaction between societal inadequacy, uninterrogated rigid beliefs, and a correct sense that something is seriously wrong about our world, but with the blame horribly misplaced. And in the end, this leads him to reproduce the ultimate goal of hierarchical ideology - to wipe out those who do not agree with the dominant class.



And then, there's the matter of the Daichi Society – one of *the* most fascinating topics of discussion within this game. While I'm not an expert on Japanese New Religion, I've absorbed a bit about the phenomena through osmosis, spoke with some people, and did a fair bit of reading for this video. Through all that I've found myself genuinely impressed at how well Setoguchi captures the image people hold of them; both followers and skeptics.

The people of the Daichi Society are a diverse bunch; some are normal people who have lost their way, some are clearly very intelligent and perhaps there merely for community, and others are people who have run out of other avenues for existence. And it's the last of those which is most important to what I brought up earlier with regards to restorative and retributive justice, because - as Judith Levine and Erica R. Meiners point out in their seminal book, *The Feminist*

and the Sex Offender, religious institutions are some of the *only* ones willing to entertain the idea of reintegrating criminals back into society.

"*If you are coming out of prison with a sex offense, in much of the [US] the only folks you can turn to are Christian evangelicals. The same is true inside US prisons. As secular rehabilitative and educational programs have lost political support, unpaid "faith-based" groups have moved in to take their place, offering everything from AA to GEDs. "In many states, nondenominational Protestant Christians make up more than 85 percent of the volunteers who enter the prison," allowing "massive numbers of Christians to enter and proselytize to those desperate for a lifeline," writes religion and gender studies scholar Tanya Erzen [...]."* – Judith Levine & Erica R. Meiners, 2020 [14]

Regardless of your stance on whether criminals should be permanently jailed or reintegrated, I think we can all agree that having a direct pipeline of 'criminal' to 'religious convert' is not a good thing, especially when religious institutions have long had issues with excusing and covering up illegal scandals of all kinds. *Especially* sexual abuse scandals. [15] I have no doubt that some people who convert become genuinely good people of faith, but I also have no doubt that many continue to offend but now with a veil of sanctity.

And the dichotomy in Swan Song captures this. Like Takuma's retributive justice, the forgiveness of the Daichi Society fails to properly contend with the larger systems that cause abuse, and in ways, sweeps it aside to make room for gospel. And this is to say nothing of how those who end up in prison more broadly; be it for sexual offenses or victimless shoplifting; are marginalized groups, effectively creating a pipeline where integration comes with the caveat of adopting faith.

Obviously, neither solution to criminal actions we see in Swan Song is a genuine solution. One side is willing to perform lethal injections for a sense of justice, and the other is willing to excuse people with little more than a prayer and an attestation to faith, which very well mirrors the current real world struggle that many communities are stuck in.

My personal belief, as I've come to from a lot of reading and a lot of thinking on what *I* want as a repeat victim of sexual assault, is that the best solution we presently have is transformative justice - the ideas of restorative justice merged with actual political action and organizing. [14] It's not enough to work on a case by case basis, because the actual *causes* for what's happened - the community attitudes, the systems in place - have to be investigated, interrogated, and torn down to create something that stops people from reaching the point where they are so desperate to feel alive or to live that they hurt others.

Does this immediately solve everything and prevent every incident? No, and it never will; the point of the political action part is to have on-going work into minimizing things as much as possible. New issues will always come up, there will always be new conflicts, and people will always be failed in new ways – but the goal is to stomp as much of this out at the roots as

possible, so that when things do go south, there's far fewer rotten pieces threatening to spoil everything.

Detour



Before we wrap up and turn to the story's final act, there's a detour that needs to be made: and that's exploring the history of Yuka and Tsukasa. Nestled into the third act are a series of flashbacks and sequences that explain to us how the two initially met, and what led them to become the people they are in the current day of the narrative. Which is particularly important for Yuka, because up until this point, there hasn't been too much to say about her as a character.

She goes around cooking and cleaning and helping around the place, occasionally provides agreeable and reasonable input to things, and spends most of her spare time with Tsukasa, the two growing closer together. Within their time together however, you start to get a sense that Yuka's sweet, kind, and patient personality may be hiding something darker.

The first clear hint of this comes during a night they spend together before Tsukasa is held captive by the Daichi Society. After having sex, a conversation between the two regarding the Daichi Society shifts to something darker, when Yuka laments how… pointless, all the fighting up to this point has been. Regardless of which group is right or wrong, we're all going to die anyways, so why cry and suffer in outrage? Everyone says they want peace, yet no one will commit to it - and to her, someone who feels as if she sees the truth that everything is doomed, that hypocrisy is *intolerable*.

Tsukasa, conversely, cannot accept that kind of nihilism. People will inevitably despair in situations like this and that must be accepted; throwing away all of your wishes, your hopes, your beliefs, and merely laughing in pure harmony, is not true happiness. It's a lie. It's *hollow*. Ultimately, the two end up disagreeing, and while Tsukasa puts on a cordial face, Yuka can clearly tell she's hit a weak point for him, and calls him an idiot under her breath for pretending he isn't upset.

It's a fantastic scene of character building that builds genuine suspense over who these two are and why they feel the ways that they feel about humanity, and it gains significantly more depth when we learn both struggled with difficult childhoods, yet both came to *very* different conclusions about humanity. Yuka was sickly with a weak heart, and Tsukasa was isolated with an abusive father.

Their paths crossed entirely by fate, as they both happened to be going to the same piano competition - but while Tsukasa shined on the stage, Yuka - who had once dedicated so much of herself to piano that it threatened her life - ultimately decided against even trying, so impressed by Tsukasa's skills that she gave up after hearing him. A painful twist of irony, too, given that Tsukasa injured his hand very shortly after when attempting to meet with Yuka again and thank her for being the first person to ever reach out to him.

All of it has left her as an emotional void; someone who was born to die long ago, rotting from the inside out, unable to care about the world or people around her. Except, of course, for Tsukasa, whom she's certain that she loves - at least, as certain as someone who doesn't know themselves and how they feel can possibly be. After going to bed, she wakes up the next day to feed the dogs, and wonders to herself: how nice it would be, to be swept away like a princess to somewhere else, somewhere far away from this hell, just as Tanomura had done with Hibari.



The dichotomy between Yuka and Tsukasa I believe forms a critical backbone for the narrative's final act. While it initially feels like just backstory to flesh out the characters - which it's incredible at - their dynamic begins to really call attention to how different people handle trauma, and what ideologies they come to through it. Though Yuka strongly believes that her life had been doomed from the start due to her weak heart, and subsequently began to believe that some are meant to die and some are meant to live, Tsukasa strongly believes in the necessity of human endurance *because* he's been faced with so many hardships.

This only grows more interesting when you consider Takuma's way of handling his life, as the third position of responding to trauma. Tsukasa, presumably because of his intense social isolation as a child, has picked up very little in terms of masculine beliefs that are toxic, and as such his ideology is almost more… *pure*. Yuka, presumably because of how society teaches women to act, takes a very passive approach to her black and white beliefs. Takuma, however, has seemingly been surrounded by toxic ideas his entire life, and buys fully into accelerating an ideology of 'the weak die, the strong live.'

Furthermore, Takuma seems *completely* unable to comprehend the idea that anybody who isn't disadvantaged in *his* specific ways - looks, social skills, and so forth - can actually *be* disadvantaged. You can see it in his monologue whenever he talks about Tsukasa, the man is

fuming with hatred over this handsome popular dude who surely has never had a hard day in his life, because he can't seem to imagine that someone like that could have had a horrific childhood and horrific trauma. Likewise, he sees Yuka as this perfect beacon of feminine beauty and grace, not knowing that she's… kind of a disaster!

She sees herself as worthless, she struggles to have empathy towards people around her, and she slogs through her life wishing she'd *just fucking die already*. And yet, for as much shit as she gives herself and as much as she claims to not understand herself or other people, the game makes it very clear she does truly have a sense of empathy. She's just so mentally frayed and burnt out from her own disaster of a life that she can't extend that as readily as one might expect.

It's hard to feel much for the horrors around you when you've yet to even resolve your own – and, I get that. Part of what prompted me to resume therapy in the US, after a substantial break from it, was the realization that, for a lot of my life, I sincerely struggled to feel much about people around me, when I felt like I really should. I could hear about tragic events around me, hear about and see death, and feel… a void, I suppose.

From talking with my therapist, I soon came to realize it was because I was so overwhelmed with my own grief and my own pain that I just *couldn't* take any more in, to say nothing about the fact that I was living with an abusive partner who only added more to that every single day. It took a lot of conversation and searching to get past that hurdle, and to feel truly in touch again with my sense of empathy – not just looking empathetic, but actually being *in touch with* deeper emotions. It's something I think anyone can reclaim, but it's not easy, especially when that's been your defense mechanism for your whole life.

What really led me to this particular reading of Yuka, is what I consider one of the most emotional scenes in the narrative. When she goes to bed, exhausted from remembering her past, she finds Aroe's phrase book near her – something that her older sister had given to her under the advice of their doctor. As the prologue demo makes extremely clear, this book is *very* important to the both of them, as it allowed Aroe to better communicate with neurotypical people in a way that they understand. It's something she can cope without, as seen by her getting along fine while with the Daichi Society by Tsukasa's account, but it's nevertheless an important object, and so Yuka decides to peak through it.

And at the end of it… is a note from Aroe's older sister, explaining how important this book is to Aroe; and how Aroe isn't like normal people. She can't communicate like a normal person, and words and actions all carry different meanings to her. She doesn't understand emotions like we do. She doesn't understand good or bad, she doesn't express happiness or sadness like us. For that reason, her sister begs, don't get mad at her if she acts out. She's different from us, *she's not a person like us*. …Yuka, unable to handle it, shuts the book and goes to sleep.

It's such a genuinely heartwrenching moment, because it shows that despite everything, Yuka *does* feel for other people - she knows Aroe is someone innocent and adorable, and feels

profound pain at how *anyone*, let alone her own sister, could talk about her like that. And look, like I said in the non-spoiler segment… I really have issues with how this game and art in general seems to mediate the worthiness and the images around high support needs disabilities around how other people feel about them.

This is to say nothing of how Aroe is portrayed in a thematic sense as a symbol of purity in a time of chaos, which is… a bit of an infantalizing perspective on disabled people that denies them the right to complex emotions and downplays their emotions. But scenes like this I believe do a good job at rebuking other issues in how disabled people are framed in media, without slamming the point in the viewer's face. Yuka's reaction says so, so much about how horrible this view of her is; and says equally as much about Yuka as a person. She does care about people, she just has never been allowed to.

Atto Quarto

Massacre



As for the contrasting philosophies of our characters, however, we have to turn to Swan Song's final act to see how they unravel. With the Daichi Society destroyed and the Vigilante Corps transformed into a private army, the narrative shifts its focus to the initial survivors who haven't abandoned all reason. Tsukasa and Aroe, thanks to the efforts of Aya, escaped from the temple alongside Taeko and a select few others with their lives intact.

Through a hint given by a mysterious shadowy figure, the two of them are able to regroup with Tanomura and Hibari, who had taken refuge in the church where it all started. While the group is able to enjoy some brief peace, everybody knows that the Vigilante Corps is too dangerous and too proactive to be trusted in letting things just 'slide,' and the fact Yuka is in their grasp leaves Tsukasa rather worried.

Though they do their best to enjoy the safety while it lasts, Tanomura has his heart set on leaving this god-forsaken place once and for all in hopes of finding civilization elsewhere – and that escape comes far sooner than expected, when one night, a group of five shows up outside. Tanomura, opting to stay behind and fight, tosses Hibari a key to his home, and creates a diversion so the others can escape safely… and unfortunately, his life is lost in the battle, leaving only Tsukasa, Aroe, and Hibari alive.

Hopeless from the death of the one she loved, and facing her wits end, Hibari; after walking for god knows how long; is ready to keel over and give up on the world. Unwilling to give up however, Tsukasa gives her a little pep talk in the form of a story; recounting how, after his hand was injured as a child, his father and doctor both told him to give up on his dreams of playing the piano, with varying degrees of kindness.

At that time, he felt the same as Hibari does now. But even having known things might be futile, and even feeling as if he had nothing left, he felt it would have been a half-assed measure to just accept defeat then and there. And so, he kept trying… and trying… and trying, until eventually, Kazuki - the worthless, cruel, abusive father he was - had to admit defeat. And in that, he saw something: someone who tried so hard to escape their fears through any vice he could, yet never could.

In the face of someone so resilient, his father couldn't hold himself together any longer. He begged for forgiveness, yet Tsukasa wouldn't give it. Tsukasa wondered, maybe, if he was being too cruel to a man who clearly had nothing left – but in the end, he stood his ground, firm in his resolve to show Kazuki his ideals and convictions. He knows Hibari is strong enough to be just like that - she can't lose, she *won't* lose. If they're lucky, if they hold together, they *will* survive. And Hibari, in her usual bratty way, agrees.

As it turns out, Tsukasa was right to be hopeful, as while they're making an igloo at night fall, they happen to catch sightings… of *people*, who don't seem to be from the group or the cult. As it turns out, a small expedition group has been sent over the mountain in order to find other survivors of the catastrophe, as the earthquake has massively devastated the surrounding

regions. Whether the damage has affected the entirety of Japan however, and possibly elsewhere, is unclear.

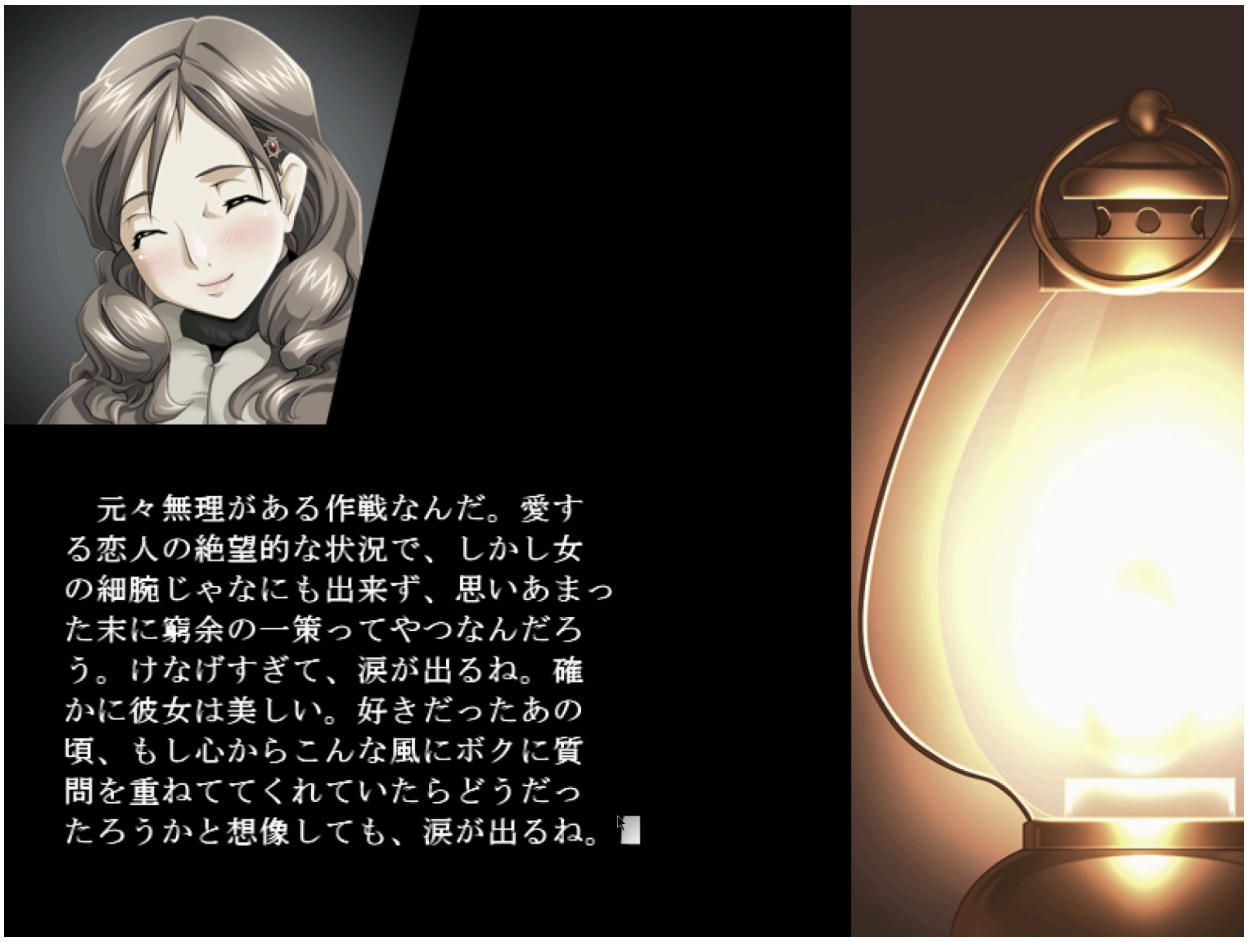
The most immediately pressing dilemma however, has to do with the school. Establishing contact with them would mean establishing contact with the largest survivor group in the town, but it also comes with immense risks to safety due to the militaristic beliefs. And not wanting to risk the safety of the expedition group, Tsukasa and Hibari - with Aroe tagging along - opt to go to the school in their place, hoping they may be friendlier to people they already know.

Unfortunately, those hopes - however small they were - had been misplaced. Takuma has effectively instituted martial law, including public executions and the assault of prisoners. And the moment that Tsukasa and Hibari show up, collected and ready to talk, his hatred flares up; demanding that they be locked in a cell for later execution.

Though Aroe manages to escape by running, the others are not so lucky. Both are thrown into a cell and tortured; Hibari is horrifically assaulted, and Tsukasa has his other hand chopped off by Takuma in an act of petty revenge, soon shown to the remaining survivors as a declaration of his intent: disobey, and face violence, or worse. All they can do now is wait for a chance to escape, and rot… but next to someone they don't quite expect to see: Taeko.

While Tsukasa and co were attempting to find Tanomura and the others, she - freed from her mothers grip - decided to reveal the truth of the Daichi Society to everybody. That there never was any God, and that their prediction of the earthquake was not divine prophecy but an educated guess based on past information, told to the public as a religious prediction due to the uncertainty around it. In the end, she is little more than a fortune teller who has lied to those in search of truth and dreams; and for this, her followers abandoned her, and left her to rot on her own, eventually ending up in the cell. A fate she's more than content to accept, denying any help from staunch allies who knew all about her lies, like Aya.

For the first time since the incident, Tsukasa finds himself next to the frail girl - no longer as Ryuugejyu, an isolated woman groomed by an abusive mother into a guru, but as Taeko, a scared and sad woman. Though Hibari has some clear bad blood with her based on her affilitations, she's still not overtly hostile to her, and even offers to help her escape. It turns out that the key which Tanomura tossed Hibari before his escape isn't actually for his home… it's the key to the prison cells. And it will not be long before they escape, and the storm truly begins.



Before everything turns to dust, Yuka takes it upon herself to do something rather… unexpected. Distraught at what's happened to Tsukasa, knowing that this is all destined to crumble, she finds Takuma and asks him just *what made him like this*. And on the terms that he can ask whatever he wants of her after she asks whatever she wants of him, the two sit next to each other, and Yuka asks one question after another. We learn of Takuma's troubled household, his traumas, how he put absurd expectations on women he knew, and it ultimately becomes clear that he is someone who's perhaps never truly lived a happy day. He's a sad, pathetic, husk of a man, who has made it everyone else's problem.

Before Takuma can make his request of Yuka however, their talk is abruptly interrupted when Koike comes running into the room, and screams at Takuma that he is being taken advantage of by a disgusting, horrific witch. In response to her insulting the woman he's obsessed over all this time; the woman he
actually cares about; he attacks Koike and forces her away.

Just as this happens, Tsukasa's group uses Hibari's key to escape their cell, reconvene with the expedition team who had also been captured, and informs the gym that they're going to orchestrate a mass escape. Unfortunately, the Vigilante Corps quickly takes notice of what's happening – and what ensues is a hellish, horrific sight. Buildings catch on fire and burn

innocents alive, people attack each other in a panic unsure who is a threat and who isn't, and women and children are slaughtered en masse.

It is, frankly, one of *the most* horrific scenes in any story I've read, and it perfectly demonstrates what the inevitable end of fascistic, militarist, hierarchical order leads to: a massacre. The desire for violence leads to groups eating themselves from inside out, and before long, everyone sees everyone as an enemy, and the world becomes engulfed in a frenzied need for individual survival. All of this, because one man chose to embody all the ills of society that hurt him in the first place.

Even that man, watching safely from the school building, is astounded at what's happening. All those fools; those slaves to their primitive regressive genes; have chosen to scramble for survival over following logical and clear rules to create peace. Even now, he believes his ideology is still correct – yet, as he says to Yuka, bound to a chair in the classroom, he can't deny there's a part of him that loves seeing this chaos and calamity. It's the end of this twisted species, everyone freed from the suffering of the world.

Conversely, Yuka seems hardly affected by it all, and only asks him if Tsukasa is safe. A foolish question to Takuma; what does THAT matter? It's only the two of them now, and he could just kill her if he wants! Why is she not quaking in fear at this?! Why is she not thinking of him?! Why can he not escape his fate as little more than a wretched, pathetic clown?! Why, after all of this, is he still a pathetic, worthless person…

Just as he contemplates this, Tsukasa bursts into the room, drenched in blood from having killed countless people to escape the crowd. Takuma lashes out against him, assuming he's just here to laugh at him and ridicule him in their final moments. But as Tsukasa says, the only one ridiculing Takuma is himself; a man who is afraid of his own wishes and desires, so convinced of his own worthlessness and uselessness that he believes nobody else could *ever* understand or sympathize with.

As a child of an abusive father, who had the one thing he loved torn away from him, Tsukasa knows that thinking well. But as someone who has persisted in life despite it all, he also knows that humanity isn't something that can be stopped by roadblocks and dead ends. Every single one of us suffers and is born with nothing, and yet many of us do incredible things; humans dream of incredible things and make them happen, our entire history has been nothing *but* us dreaming of incredible things and making them happen. And is that alone not proof of how incredible humanity is?

Takuma simply cannot see it this way. He sees nothing incredible about our accomplishments. All he's ever wanted is to be with another person; to live with them, eat with them, fuck them, and nothing more. These greater dreams - the beauty of humanity as Tsukasa sees it - are worth nothing to him. After all, has this apocalypse really not proven to him what human nature REALLY is? With all civilization gone, humans have, as he sees it, reverted into more primitive

beings. *That* is humanity. But this chaos, that kind of hedonistic, empty life Takuma purports to desire… as Yuka says, that's not really what he wants, is it?

After hitting her in rage, Tsukasa steps in and begins to fight Takuma; with Koike soon appearing again to try and take aim at the bastard himself, enraged that at no point was she ever truly loved or seen as anything more than a toy to him. But as if God himself has had enough… another earthquake suddenly appears, and ends the fight unceremoniously. Takuma and Koike, buried under rubble and left for dead. Everyone outside has been killed, murdered, or has fled. Tsukasa and Yuka… are the only two left.



Though they cling on to the vague hope that perhaps Hibari and Aroe are still alive, the two find after arriving at the church that even they – some of the most innocent people in this all - have been buried alive under the rubble. And it is this, that breaks Yuka's exterior, and leads her to reveal how she truly feels: that everything is meaningless and hollow. She knows she should continue to push on until the bitter end, but she can't stop herself from wondering *what the point even is*. Why live if there's nothing joyful to live for? Why is she, this husk of a human who has lied to everyone, *still alive*?

Because it's not just people like Koike or Takuma she's tricked; she's kept things hidden from Tsukasa, too. She pretended to be a virgin just in hopes of impressing him, when in reality, she'd been with many men before him just for the hell of it, never actually caring much about any of them. She feels she cares about Tsukasa now, but she doesn't even know that for sure. Everything she's saying, she's saying it only to serve her own ego, knowing that if Tsukasa dies here and now from his wounds, that she'll have said the ugly truth to him and taken the load off her shoulders.

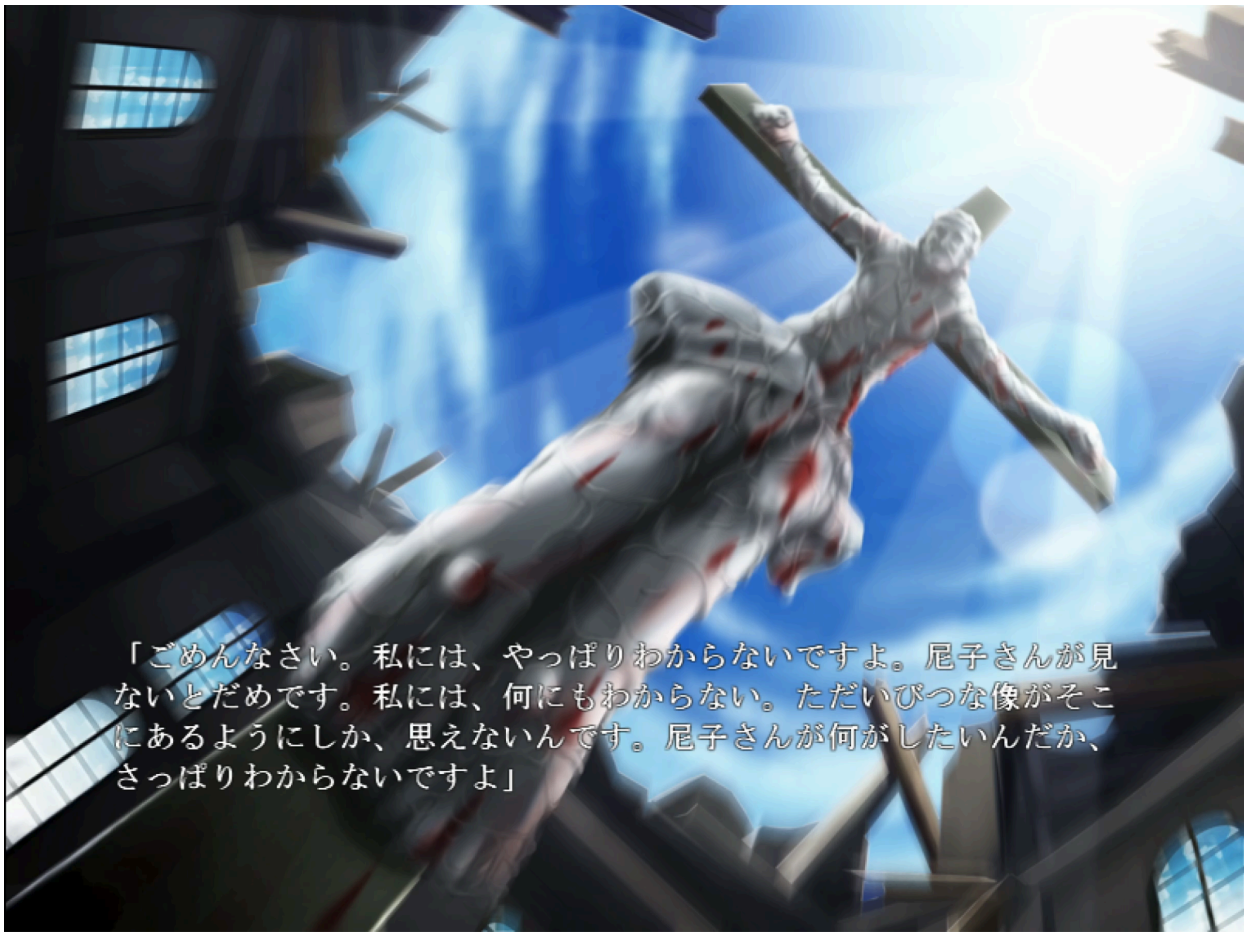
How odd it is that such a horrible, joyless, cursed person has made it this far in life. How frustrating it is that even now, Tsukasa tells her platitudes; about all humans being beautiful; when he surely cannot understand what's truly disgusting and horrific in this world; what it's like to be overlooked and ignored, faced with the reality that the only person you've ever truly felt a thing for is about to die right in front of you.

Tsukasa, undeterred by her pain and regret, attempts to change the subject, and asks her if they can resume the work Aroe had been doing at the church. Because for the short time that they were there in the beginning, she spent much of her days attempting to reassemble the statue of Christ that had fallen; a symbol of humanity. While Yuka is initially hesitant, convinced it's pointless and futile, Tsukasa still motions forward to complete the task – and soon, she follows suit.

Even as Tsukasa is dying, even as Yuka is wrapped up in her own mind, the two are still able to come together to put together a monument to humankind: not as a tribute to God or any other religion, but to the people they loved who they lost along the way. It doesn't matter how pointless it is, it doesn't matter if they're the only people who will ever see it, what matters is it could be done, and was done.

What matters is that the two of them are there together, as the bright shining sun beats down on them, smiling at the beautiful sky they fought so hard to see again. Perhaps – if people come to save them, Tsukasa muses – he can bring more smiles to peoples faces with the piano. Perhaps with that, he can reach the hearts of so many people, like humans are meant to do…

Finale



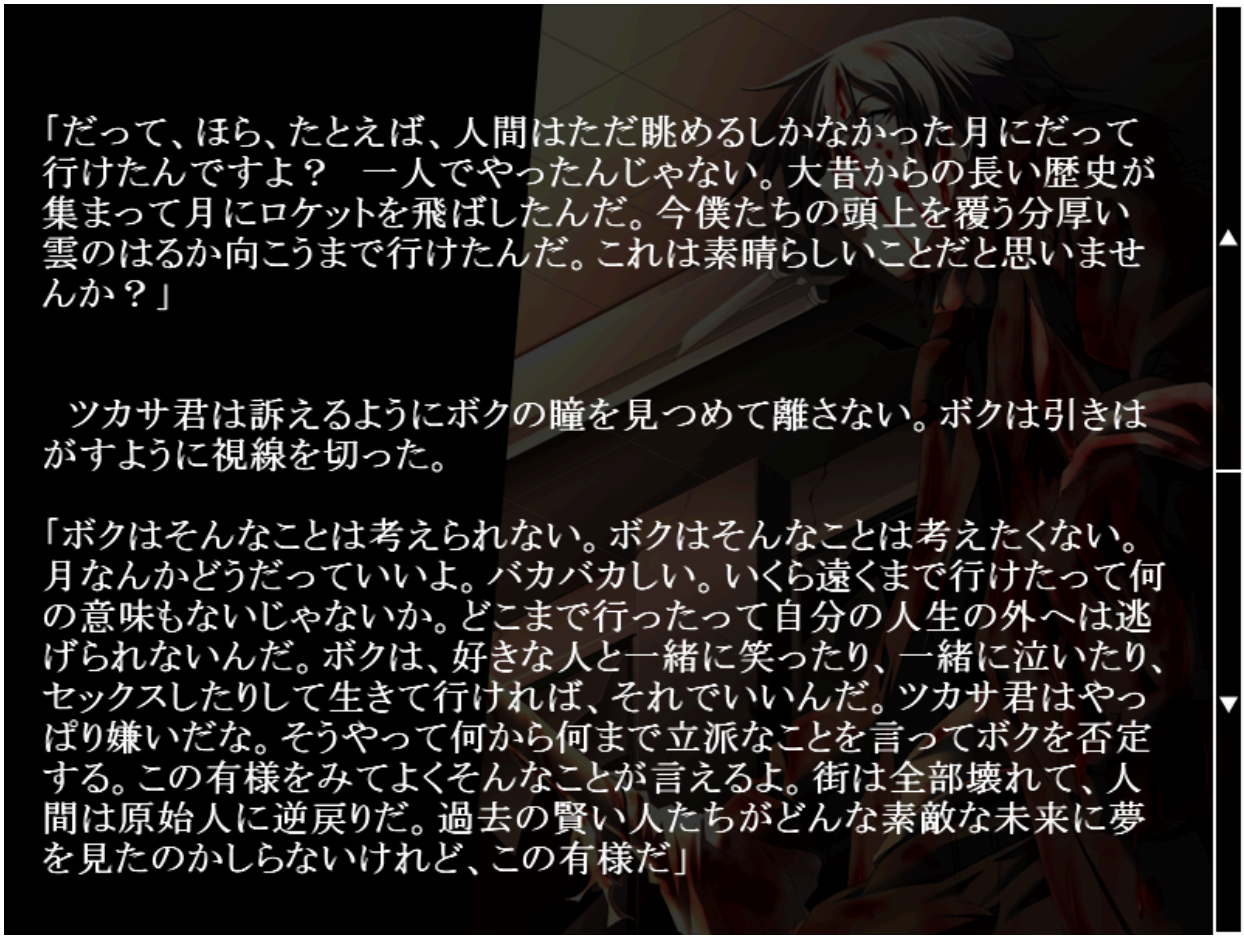
Swan Song's normal ending is, in my opinion, one of the most tragic and beautiful and meaningful endings to any visual novel that I've seen. It perfectly encapsulates everything this story is trying to do and say – the spiral of personal failings into grand catastrophes, the clash of ideologies, and the beauty of humanity as a species that makes dreams into reality, even when it may mean nothing in the grander scheme. But what I find most fascinating in it all, is what it says about human nature - and how we perceive it.

A recurring theme I've always found frustrating within disaster media is how it paints 'human nature' as something unkind, brutal, and unforgiving [16]. When social order collapses, people are said to turn into bullies, abusers, rapists, and violent murderers who form antagonistic factions with no interest in cooperating with others across ideological lines. As it goes, people will inevitably work to preserve themselves, because we are selfish beings only truly concerned with the self.

This narrative extends far beyond disaster media, of course, it seeps into our news feeds. Every time a natural disaster occurs, the media - and particularly the right-wing media - focuses on how people are apparently looting stores, assaulting women, and wreaking havoc upon the social order. Counterintuitively, people just *love* to destroy their own community, which is proof we need strong leadership! Except, as it turns out, this is not the case.

"*During this period, disaster survivors are focused on immediate survival needs, and they tend to rely on one another to address those needs. As survivors bind together to collectively overcome the social trauma and physical destruction caused by the extreme event, feelings of altruism, acts of prosocial behavior, and levels of informal social control increase. Although the media tends to portray images of "chaos" and subsequently perpetuate the notion that disasters lead to a breakdown of the social order, our study shows that disasters* diminish *most forms of criminal activity.*" - Zahran et al, 2009 [17]

As Zahran points out in their article as well, this does not mean all crime diminishes. Domestic crimes for example can rise – but, as Shekhi and others point out in their 2025 paper, "*when pre-disaster crimes are high in society, compared to societies with less crime, post-disaster crimes such as looting will also be high.*" [18] In other words, the criminal acts that people perform in times of disaster; in times of need; are not borne out of innate cruelty, but rather out of the constructs and circumstances of society… just as crimes *before* disaster are.



With this in mind: can we *really* say that human nature is cruelty, when cruelty is so often borne out of horrible circumstances? This is what Takuma seems to argue. He fully believes that the true form of humanity *is* the ills of society: the things that have caused him to resent being a

weak, frail, skittish man, are not toxic ideals of masculinity or hierarchies that demand the weak fall into line, but human nature running its course. And subsequently, all of his grotesque vigilante activities are normal too - he has become powerful, and therefore, he is *right*. Human nature *is* a brutal struggle for power.

Tsukasa, however, accredits that this does not represent humanity. He sees our ability to create things that are more than us, to *be* more than ourselves, as the truth of human nature. He stands by people, even at their worst, because he truly believes that humanity is more than an individual. And he believes that each individual is innately equal – as so beautifully described in the platitude that Yuka dismisses: "*even if they're unsightly or foolish, all people are beautiful. Even if they were never blessed, or made mistakes, a person's life is beautiful."*

This, I believe, is the true message of Swan Song. It's not a game about how humanity is innately disgusting and horrible and prone to - as Takuma puts it - 'regressing' to being 'slaves to their genetics,' it's a game about how humans are something beautiful that have been put through the wringer, corrupted, and destroyed by a cruel and horrific and uncaring society around them.

One of the greatest ironies within the narrative is that it's Tsukasa of all people who comes to realize this. Because as I've said before, and as characters make clear throughout the narrative, he gives the impression of someone who wouldn't have really suffered in life – a good looking man with incredible talents and presumably a good academic track record, is not the kind of person you expect to understand suffering and to be able to give a meaningful lecture about how all humans are built equal.

As such, both Takuma and Yuka refuse to take any of his messaging seriously, saying his words are nothing more than arrogant platitudes of a man who hasn't known true pain. And that is an *extremely* deep cut for me personally, because I've been in this exact situation where people ignore what I say on superficial grounds. "*You're a pretty woman so you don't really understand being trans,*" "*you were homeschooled so you had to be lucky,*" "*you got to do whatever you want so you had it easy,*" and so forth.

This becomes even more interesting with Tsukasa, given that he can be quite easily read as neurodivergent in some way. Whether you want to say he has CPTSD or autism or whatever, it's incredibly apparent that something about his mind is different from what's considered the norm - and people not only seem to fail to recognize this, but actively are *jealous* of his ability to be all cool and unemotive. People just cannot comprehend that someone is disabled, divergent, or otherwise 'abnormal' if it's not in the ways they've been taught to recognize: ugliness, anxiousness, and so forth.

Some people cannot look past their own experiences and biases towards certain types of people, to realize that *nobody* is immune to suffering - having certain privileges or upbringings does not shield you from them all. Marginalization is a diverse, intersecting problem, and even people who should theoretically be on top of the totem pole - like cisgender, heterosexual men -

can be made to suffer immensely simply by not fitting into the mechanisms that society deems correct for them.

And of course, I'm not going to deny that some people can behave in cruel ways not apropos of society's problems. Human nature is too complicated to boil down to something as simple as "all people are good," but if I have to choose some sort of belief system to guide me through life, I'd rather choose one that advocates for humans as generally *good* rather than generally *bad.*



My point in all this, is this: just because society has corrupted and malformed what we perceive as human nature, does not mean human nature itself is twisted, nor that humanity is hopeless. This is what is proved within Swan Song's true ending, which originates from one small change at the beginning of the fourth act: Tanomura, rather than fleeing, chooses to stand his ground, *and fight for what he believes is right*.

Through this, he's able to apprehend Takuma and hide out with Tsukasa, Hibari, and Aroe, eventually showing his face to an exhausted survivors camp; everyone happy to see the end of martial law. The fragile reign the vigilante corps once had falls apart without their leader, and people begin to rebuild life anew, sowing crops in the devastated land that will sustain everyone

until the town can be rebuilt, or they can take refuge somewhere safer. Without horrific fires of chaos being lit, people - in these disastrous times - come together to save one another.

It's an ending that in some ways feels almost *too* peachy and sweet after 17 hours of catastrophes and inhumane acts, and yet it also feels *right* given the little moments of hope and peace throughout the game. It's the resolution to all the times that Hibari wondered about the humanity of the apprehended; that Tsukasa gave people pep talks and believed in humanity; that people were able to come together and find love even in a hostile wasteland.

It also has one of the most powerful moments for Yuka as a character that ties her arc up perfectly. Like in the normal ending, an earthquake occurs that destroys the old school building and further damages the town – but unlike that ending where she's held captive, Yuka here instead goes out on her own to try and find all of the dogs that ran away in fear from the quake.

And in that process… she gets buried alive, and sees a vision of a child – her past self – where we realize that what Yuka is truly afraid of the most, is being happy. In her mind, it's easier to live without fear if you don't know kindness to begin with; living only in the shadows means you never have to deal with the pain that seeing everything illuminated brings to you. She's afraid of the moon and the spring and everything that should be beautiful, because… she simply *is.* She can't even explain why. And the dream ends.

It's a poignant and haunting scene that shows she is truly, deeply troubled deep down - and in ways that I think many people can relate to. She's not this inhuman monster like Koike makes her out to be, she's not some emotionless clueless being like she makes herself out to be, she is a traumatized and troubled person who does what she does because that is how she has survived.

Swan Song is a game *brimming* with empathy and love for humanity in every single moment, even when humanity is at its worst. Even when people lie and destroy and abuse, it still recognizes that *humans* are behind every single act, and that those humans don't act without reason. It recognizes that humanity is flawed, and that society exacerbates those flaws, but that at our very core are beings who want to love and want to do good. It's a game that asks us to dream of what could make that love and that goodness real – and the cost to our world, should we fail to realize what is tearing that away from us.

"*Utopia: the first merit of this word is that it compels us to look to the future. Its second merit is that it invites us, at least in the name of provisional morality, to pay no attention to the myriad arguments that may be marshalled against it, short of simply regarding them, in Sartre's straightforward but effective language, as utterances of the 'ruling class': what we might call the prevailing system. Practical, pragmatic utopia, progressive but gradual: these adjectives matter because they govern the possibility of a passage to effective action.*" - Marc Augé, 2018

Overall



So, at the end of it all, do I recommend Swan Song? And the answer is… probably quite obviously, *yes*. Lead writer Setoguchi's first truly successful work is doubtlessly one of the most captivating and breathtaking titles to come out of a very, *very* crowded year in the genre. 2005 is the same year that gave us Sharin no Kuni, Fate/hollow ataraxia, Parfait, Mugen Kairou, School Days, Yume Miru Kusuri, and *so much more* – and yet this game still stands out as one of the greatest and most memorable.

Through its incredible characters, captivating and believable apocalypse scenario, gorgeous aesthetics, mesmerizing score, impressive voice acting, and thought-provoking themes about human nature, Swan Song remains, to this day, a must-play within the medium. And thankfully, it's quite easy to get a hold of now thanks to digital distribution on places like DLSite, easily patched into English for those who don't know Japanese.

Some of the highest praise I can sing for this game, besides what I've just given to it, is that it's gotten me *extremely* curious about the rest of Setoguchi's catalogue. People have been telling me for ages to play games like Musicus and Kira Kira, and certainly, Swan Song has gotten me curious to see more from him, so… maybe we'll be seeing some of those in the future on this channel? Who knows.

What I do know is that Swan Song is a visual novel I'm going to be thinking about for a long time from now; a work that sees the beauty in humanity, but is grounded in the flaws we have, and the work it will take to achieve something greater than we have now. But I; like a certain stoic pretty boy; believe in that greatness. I know we have the power to dream, and make those dreams real. We can make things right, even when all has gone wrong. I believe in that.

[1] https://vndb.org/v914
[2] https://automaton-media.com/articles/interviewsjp/20240427-290991/ "そうなりますと、瀬戸口さんの作品は「鬱ゲー」とラベリングされることが多いですが、そのことは本意ではないということですね。"
[3] https://vndb.org/s27648
[4] https://vndb.org/s300
[5] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Akio_Watanabe
[6] https://vndb.org/s1071
[7] https://vndb.org/s113
[8] https://vndb.org/s287
[9] https://vndb.org/s32
[10] https://vndb.org/s631
[11] https://law.wisc.edu/fjr/rjp/justice.html
[12] https://www.naacpldf.org/racism-wrongful-convictions-mass-incarceration/
[13] https://youtu.be/3cpwJ7o0o6c
[14] Feminist and the Sex Offender, Judith Levine & Erica R. Meiners, 2021, ch3
[15] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_abuse#References
[16] https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ApocalypseAnarchy
[17] Natural Disasters and Social Order: Modeling Crime Outcomes in Florida, Zahran et al, 2009
[18] Looting and antisocial behavior after disasters: a systematic review, Sheikhi et al, 2025