

# A Game Worth Knowing About

Games 101

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## *Kingdom Hearts 358/2 Days:* **Pay with Our Flesh**

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*Kingdom Hearts 358/2 Days* begins with an introduction of the main character, Roxas, and his best friend, Axel, sitting atop a clock tower and watching the sunset. “Roxas...are you really sure that you don't have a heart?” Axel asks. Roxas is unsure, but responds, “If there is something in there...inside us---then we'd feel it, wouldn't we?” Axel agrees before handing him a sea-salt ice cream. In 2009, Square Enix and h.a.n.d. released the fifth installment of the Kingdom Hearts series, *Kingdom Hearts 358/2 Days*. In collaboration with Disney Interactive Studios, *Days* is an action role-playing video game for the Nintendo DS. This is the first *Kingdom Hearts* title on DS as previous games were exclusive to the Playstation 2 and GameBoy Advanced. While at first being speculative about releasing a *Kingdom Hearts* title on a device with two screens, game director Tetsuya Nomura recognized the market changing for more serious games and felt “as a game creator that I wanted to give people a more straight-forward “game”-like game” (Ultimania). Rather than a multiplayer game or using the DS’ specifications, Nomura aimed for a traditional *Kingdom Hearts* game of hack-and-slash. This notion embraces tradition with modernity and change. However, with praise for the mechanics and graphics, *Days* faces criticism for its story, written by Nomura himself in the span of 2 weeks. The game focuses on Roxas, Axel, and their new friend, Xion. They are all Nobodies, beings without hearts who work for Organization XIII. As the story ebbs and flows, Roxas, Axel and Xion’s friendship is put to the test before ultimately being destroyed. Through developing the story of *Kingdom Hearts 358/2 Days*, Nomura’s internal battle is reflective in the game as he created a deeply personal narrative for his team, his players, and himself.

The team that surrounded Nomura was the key to development while simultaneously serving as a motivating factor to succeed. Although he initially wrote the narrative alone, Nomura was a part of a team of skilled and dedicated game designers at Square Enix. As he was

building off an already well-developed game series, Nomura was troubled on who to ask to be a scenario writer for the game. In order to properly continue the structure of the game's narrative, he reached out to Tomoco Kanemaki. In an interview with Ultimania, Nomura revealed, "Kanemaki-san had previously written novels for the KH series, and I thought it would be good to work with her on the actual games, so this time I asked her" (Ultimania). Kanemaki would go on to write 12 *Kingdom Hearts* novel adaptations for each game installment, including the *Days* novel. Kanemaki oversaw the dialogue, previous scenario writer Yukari Ishida corrected the fine details, and Nomura completed the final revisions. With a strong, yet small team of writers, *Days* communicates the emotional impact of what it means to be human and develop a sense of self. After writing, the game began assembling. When in the development stage, playtesters play an imperative role in the player experience. Especially when developing with new mechanics on the Nintendo DS and utilizing it as a tool for narrative, the production of *Days* had many misunderstandings. Nomura explained, "The noise that was put over the reflections of Sora that appear on the bottom screen was something we'd been thinking about since the early stages of writing, but during debugging we were often asked, 'Is this a bug?' (laughs)" (Ultimania). With his dedication to his team and Square Enix Japan, Nomura felt the pressure to perform his best. NYU Game Center Assistant Arts professor Winnie Song previously worked at Square Enix Montreal and gave insight to how teams are an inspiration to work. In an interview, Song observed, "We should not forget all these people are artists and not just product makers. I think at the time, Nomura really cared about making something everyone would be happy with" (Song). Song's perspective on the creative process behind *Days* humanizes these creators as not just developers behind a game, but people who have a story to tell the world.

Through enveloping himself in personal struggle, Nomura wanted to create an emotionally impactful game. In an interview with Ultima, Nomura recalled the isolated state in which he wrote the game: alone in a hotel room for two weeks, living on canned food (Ultimania). Song remarked, “For Japanese developers, they feel much more responsibility as the leader than Western developers.” By taking on the emotional work to create a game that the fans will not be disappointed by, or the developer himself will not be disappointed by, “sometimes [it] means locking yourself in a room and killing yourself slightly over it” (Song). While it is not uncommon for game developers to give their all for a game, Nomura’s dedication to self-isolate and create is both astonishing and painful. These feelings are translated into the game’s fabric. The tenderest moments are when Roxas, Axel, and Xion spend their days sitting on the clocktower after work. Talking, laughing, and eating ice cream is the basis of their friendship as Nobodies, people without hearts. During a moment when Xion is referred to as an “it,” i.e. puppet rather than a person, Axel and Roxas defend her. “Get it memorized, alright? We are best friends,” Axel remarks. As they develop their relationship amongst their crumbling Organization, it seems that these three friends are learning what it means to be human, and to have a heart. In an interview with Famitsu, Nomura defines a heart in the *Kingdom Hearts* series:

“It is the theme of the series. To explain it simply, a person has a body, a soul, and a heart. As an image, the soul is the life source, without it a person would be dead. Since the heart doesn’t have a form, memories play an important part in forming a heart. Also, the heart isn’t limited to people, but to all things. I tried to explain this concept to Disney, and they merely said that it must be an Eastern way of thinking. It may be interesting how overseas players think of it” (Famitsu).

Nomura's view on hearts and memories are tied in that no matter who or what you are, the memories created are what shapes a person. Xion and Roxas are constantly remembering the past lives they lived, which causes a rupture in understanding who they are alone and in relation to each other. I interpret this concept as a way to live forever in the hearts of those who you've met, experienced, and even the players that engage with the game. In an article from GameGrin, game reviewer Dylan Pamituan wrote:

“A lot of people don’t like the Kingdom Hearts story, and I can definitely agree it has problems, but by experiencing it, you realise how well-written the characters are and how much you grow to care for them, especially when you’ve played the previous games. Yeah, you won’t get the whole “Who will I have ice cream with?” moment, but thinking about it makes you sadder when you realise that Roxas associates friendship with ice cream and that without Xion, he’ll have no one” (Game Grin).

This is why *Kingdom Hearts 358/2 Days*, although at times convoluted, is a personal game that explores the depths of human emotions, friendships, and connections.

Nomura's self-sacrificial testament to dedicate himself to his team, players, and his personal expectations is reflected in the narrative of *Kingdom Hearts 358/2 Days*. Through the initial development stage, Nomura took it upon himself to create an emotionally-driven narrative for Roxas and his friends. However, it was the support of his small team of writers and playtesters that cultivated an impactful experience for the players. In turn, the entire game is representative of a team trying to work together. Designers often input their own emotions into their art, and Nomura is no different. It serves as inspiration to create with purpose and sacrifice. As *Days* focuses on the fictional relationships of the characters who seemingly have no hearts, Nomura and his team poured their own hearts into a beautiful, yet bittersweet story about

friendship. As the game ends, Xion tempts Roxas to battle her in an act of self-sacrifice. In getting what she wanted, she is defeated by her best friend. Xion's body crystalizes as she tells him goodbye, and the memories they once shared starts to fade. Reflecting on Song's own commitment to her team, she stated, "We do owe stuff to each other in a way that we don't feel until we are driven to by a time or money limit, and then we give our bodies. Our payment has to be flesh" (Song).

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Winnie Song, interviewed by Whit Walton, Oct 26, 2025, transcript and recording.