

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Hotline Miami
Platform: PC, Mac, Linux, Playstation 3
Genre: Top-down action
Release Date: October 23rd, 2012
Developer: Dennaton Games
Publisher: Devolver Digital
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Jonatan “Cactus” Soderstrom

Overview

Hotline Miami is an homage to the games and movies of the 1980s, being styled as a top-down, 8-bit NES title, while referencing violent action films with its setting and plot. The player takes control of a man known only as Jacket, a silent, brutal killer who dons animal masks with different personalities. At the instruction of a voice on his answering machine, Jacket drives to different buildings in Miami and murders everyone inside. Over time, a growing conspiracy begins to reveal itself, and Jacket finds himself in ever greater danger as outside events force him in deeper.

Characters

- **Jacket** – The player character, Jacket is named only after his omnipresent letterman jacket. He also keeps a suite of animal masks that give him different abilities and sometimes speak to him in hallucinations. Jacket’s personality is taciturn and stoic, and he seems to never speak on his own. However, his masks speak to him and seem to represent different parts of his personality. Without speech, his primary means of expression is murder.
- **The Masks** – Three of Jacket’s masks appear to him at different times in hallucinations. The apparent dominant personality is Richard the Rooster. They ask Jacket about what he thinks and feels, and give him clues about where he is and what he is doing. It is Richard who asks Jacket the arc question: “Do you like hurting other people”?
- **The Biker** – Another hired killer similar to Jacket, with the same shadowy employers. He begins killing because he finds it enjoyable, and is quite talkative. His investigations into the nature of the answering machine messages brings him into conflict with Jacket, who is ordered to kill him. After Jacket’s story is completed, a secondary story starring the Biker can be played that explains a continuation of events, or possibly an alternate plot,

as depending on the story, either Jacket or the Biker dies during their single encounter.

- **Beard** – Jacket’s only friend for most of the game, who seems (in Jacket’s eyes) to work at every single restaurant and video rental store in the city.
- **Richter** – The surly, bald man who replaces Beard and refuses to talk to Jacket, later attacking him in his home. He wears a rat mask but does not appear to have the same personality problems as Jacket.
- **The Janitors** – The true source of the phone calls, who appear first as silent onlookers and are only revealed at the very end.

Breakdown

Hotline Miami’s plot is, at its heart, a crime thriller with a heavy psychological bent. However, the design choices made as far as characterization and gameplay prove to have unique interaction. For most of its duration, *Hotline Miami* chooses to focus on its primary theme of senseless violence, instead of its plot. As a result, Jacket himself is has a unique form of characterization. All there is to Jacket’s life is killing, and in this way, the gameplay of *Hotline Miami* IS Jacket’s entire character.

Jacket has no name of his own, and even the nickname “Jacket” is not given to him in-game. Yet each of his 20 or so killing masks has its own, and a different combat ability it allows him to use. This implies that Jacket defines himself only through the different ways that he kills things, and little else. The masks are chunks of Jacket’s true personality that he expresses one at a time over his silent, plain self.

Hidden somewhere between the slayings is a plot. *Hotline Miami* offers plot details sparsely and with limited context, but Jacket is never interested in finding out more. Some quotes suggest that the plot itself is the Macguffin that the characters can never reach. From Beard and his masks, Jacket learns scattered dates, places, and names, but none of them are ever linked together in a meaningful way until the game’s final moments. Even then, little is made certain about how much was real, how much it mattered, and how true any of it is.

Further complicating matters is the Biker’s storyline. Jacket and the Biker first meet during a boss fight, after Jacket has been hastily assigned a new target during a mission. Jacket kills him. After completing the rest of Jacket’s story, the game now lets the player take control of the Biker, in a short set of flashbacks. In the new playthrough, when Jacket and the Biker first meet, the Biker kills Jacket instead.

By switching to the Biker as a main character, *Hotline Miami* drastically changes its style. Now the plot is in focus, and the Biker expresses himself through speech and actions that don’t result in death, at least some of the time. Like Jacket, he is still somewhat characterized by his approach to physical violence, but in a different way. The Biker has a defined personality separate from the player: a particular style of speech and a real motivation. He always uses the same weapon in the same way, a radical departure from Jacket’s open-ended blank slate. To put

it in the game's terms, Jacket always kills how the player wants to, but the Biker always kills like the Biker.

The Biker's playthrough also brings the story into focus, and links Jacket's clues into a whole. The dates are given meaning and characters like Richter and the Janitors are given purpose. In Jacket's playthrough, for instance, the Janitors made a total of two silent, background appearances. But in the Biker's playthrough they turn out to be the masterminds of the entire plot. The entire mystery is laid out and solved, detail by detail.

Still, even with these revelations in its final act, *Hotline Miami* has more questions to ask of the player than answers to give them. The most memorable dialogue in the game is the masks asking Jacket about who he is, whether he enjoys hurting others, and whether he even wants to know. During the final reveal, the janitors both mock the Biker for being so easy to goad into violence. The accusations and inquiries made by the game's characters are plainly pointed at the player as much as Jacket and the Biker.

Ultimately, the complete story doesn't have much to do with Jacket's mental problems or the focus on meaningless violence. It's more of a backdrop to place these themes against for context. It sets a stage for the player to act on impulse, and then asks uncomfortable questions about their actions that only they can answer.

Strongest Element

The strongest element of *Hotline Miami* is its unorthodox method of characterization. The player learns about Jacket's personality solely through gameplay, without having to read about it, hear it stated, or have it shown in a cut scene. The game builds a cohesive setting with Jacket at the center point, but never directly states anything about him, instead letting the player experience for themselves what Jacket's thought process is like and having them answer the game's probing questions in his stead. This can be taken as a statement on the nature of games: Can mechanics alone take on the role of developing a character? Does taking part in the killing tell us enough about Jacket that we don't need to be told more?

Unsuccessful Element

Hotline Miami's lowest point comes when the Biker's plot begins. In trying to finish up the story in a clear, decisive way, the second act ends up stripping away most of the elements at play in the first act. Jacket's status as an intentional non-character is at odds with the detailed character of the Biker. The Biker also isn't characterized by the gameplay like Jacket is. The gameplay thus loses most of its symbolic value, reduced to being simply the means to advance the story.

The player is no longer in charge of their avatar's behavior, but just acting out the established role in a plot that they are waiting to see the next twist of. This minimizes the player's agency. As such, a lot of the game's prying questions about the player's actions lose their bite. This turns the Biker into an unnecessary storytelling crutch, used to reach the final reveal of the game's story in a way that invalidates the player's role in it all. The only saving grace is that the uncertain nature of the twin stories keeps the truth of the Biker's story somewhat murky, but then why include it at all?

Highlight

The first meeting between Jacket and the Biker is a turning point in the game, and it is masterfully set up. After fighting to the top floor of a building, Jacket is about to shamle back downstairs. The pulsating music stops and is replaced by white noise, as in every level prior, to indicate that it's time to go home. Before he can leave, though, he receives a new call that tells him of "a change of plans", and instructs him to head to a different building. Inside, everyone is already dead. He opens the last door at the top floor, discovering the Biker and kicking off a boss fight.

In this sequence, the game completely reverses the expectations it has been building in the player. It interrupts the usual ritual of leaving the area and seeing the corpses on the way out and plays it backwards, letting the player enter and explore a building already full of bodies. It sickens the player by showing them their own handiwork, but by a different hand. When the player reaches the final room and finds a lone masked man, they realize that it's their mirror image. The game forces the player to look at their own actions from an outside perspective, creating another unsettling question about their behavior.

Critical Reception

Metacritic places *Hotline Miami*'s aggregate score at 85/100. Most reviews praise its arcade-style gameplay and stylish presentation, with secondary focus on its actual storyline. Allistair Pinsof of Desctructoid noted that "narrative and mechanics share the spotlight equally", adding that "it builds up towards a commentary on games and pointless violence".

Similarly, many reviews also criticize the later levels difference from the earlier ones, with Sparky Clarkson of GameCritics.com saying "In its final levels, *Hotline Miami* also feels less robust and interesting to play, as a consequence of some restrictive mechanics it adopts for narrative reasons," referencing the style and gameplay shift of the Biker's story.

Lessons

- Narrative and gameplay can be the same thing. The player learns about the personality of Jacket solely through playing as him. Instead of Jacket having scripted dialogue and actions to express his emotions, the gameplay is designed to elicit the same emotions in the player.
- If you are going to experiment, commit to it. The audience will grow accustomed to the style presented to them first, and if there is a major, sudden shift, it breaks their immersion and loses their focus while they readjust.
- A limited plot does not mean limiting ideas. Though *Hotline Miami*'s plot is not the focus of the game, the developers still put great care into presenting their chosen themes to the player through gameplay and visual design. They don't make it clear why Jacket kills, but they still ask questions about what it means to enjoy it, and whether the player truly does.

Summation

Despite its sparse storytelling, *Hotline Miami* is a very carefully put-together narrative, especially considering how arcade-inspired its gameplay and visual design are. It turns out that its narrative structure is rather like a Su Doku puzzle: The limited information offered at the start serves as the linchpin for a much larger solution. Also like the puzzle, it has more reason to keep your attention when you are still far from solving it, and as you accelerate towards the solution, it becomes less challenging and simply an exercise in waiting for every last box to be filled.