

Game Narrative Review

Game Title: The Dark Eye

Platform: PC/Mac

Genre: 1st-Person Adventure with Horror/Puzzle themes

Release Date: October 31, 1995

Developer: inSCAPE

Publisher: Time Warner Interactive, Expert Software Inc.

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Russell Lees (playwright)

Voiceovers: William S. Burroughs (Beat Generation icon and “Naked Lunch” author)

Animator: Doug Beswick (Beetlejuice, Aliens, The Addams Family)

Audio: Thomas Dolby (yes, *that* Dolby)

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*Is all we see or seem
But a dream within a dream?
-- Edgar Allen Poe*

Overview

A mid-90's critical and commercial flop, **The Dark Eye** eventually gained a cult following years after its developer inSCAPE closed its doors. Though the game is not a direct adaptation of Edgar Allen Poe's works, the scribe's prose and characteristic dark themes permeate **The Dark Eye**'s overall narrative tone.

Gameplay involves no health or battle system, and is rather simple. A series of points and mouse clicks – using a floating hand cursor, no less – move the player through the environment quickly. A click opens doors, and picks up items, and allows the player to otherwise interact with objects and characters... *and that's it.*

The game's narrative benefits from its limited gameplay. Narrative is handled with a fair amount of dialogue between characters, but mainly through interaction with a wide range of objects, such as books, letters, and paintings, all of which reveal the game's backstory, provide clues, and advance the plot.

There are three stories for the player to explore: "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Cask of Amontillado," and the introductory story, "Berenice." The outcome of each story is limited to two results: become incited to commit murder and advance to the next story, or fall victim to murder, in which case the game ends.

Characters

The main characters from the intro storyline, “Berenice,” are as follows:

Player Character - The Player Character is never named. Not by the game’s developer, nor by other characters in the game. He does, however, have a face, which can be discerned from reflective surfaces, and seen in detail in front of a mirror. The protagonist isn’t a dashing hero, even by early 19th century standards. A mirror reveals him to be balding and blind in one eye. Like all of the characters in the story, he too has a flaw. That said, he is complimented for playing the piano beautifully and, despite his looks, has a pleasantly articulate speaking voice.

Uncle Edwin’s Assistant – The Assistant is the first character whom the player character encounters in the game. He is a young man, with a brusque but aloof attitude, who keeps odd hours. His thoughts are made aware to the player after a “soul jump” is made to his body. (A soul jump occurs when the consciousness of the player moves from the body of one character to another. Eye contact with the intended character is required to perform a soul jump.) The assistant is revealed to have murderous inclinations.

Uncle Edwin – The catalyst character, Uncle Edwin is the character that the Player Character has come to visit at Malevolence Mansion. He is first met while painting in the sun room. He is happy to see the Player Characters, as he says the presence of relatives calms his nerves. He warns that the paint thinner he uses is prone to cause hallucinations, and that the thinner once caused a man to scratch out his own eyes in frenzy. It is after inhaling the thinner that the Player Character has his first transformative nightmare.

Berenice – The titular character. The Player Character meets Berenice upstairs in the piano room. She is having a drink with Henry when the Player Character enters the room. Berenice is not the same person the player character remembers from their youth. The story revolves around protecting Berenice from her own sudden decline. She is now prone to fits and is under strict doctor’s orders not to overexert herself.

Henry – The brother of the player character, who has traveled widely for a time, but has finally returned home. He claims his troubles are over. He seeks Elise’s hand in marriage, but Uncle Edwin forbids it because they are cousins.

Dr. Reynolds – The doctor who cares for Berenice. He has given her strict orders not to leave the mansion for her own health.

Egaeus Poyton – Father of Berenice. He continually looks out for his daughter’s well-being, as he corresponds through written letters with Dr. Reynolds.

Malevolence Mansion – Perhaps the main character in the story is the mansion itself. It’s cavernous basement and series of locked rooms presents the largest obstacle for the Player Character throughout the story. The mansion’s walls are papered with pages from Poe’s books. A painting of a black bird also appears on its walls – referencing another of Poe’s famous stories, “The Raven.”

Breakdown

In many ways, **The Dark Eye** is the perfect game to offer up for narrative analysis because it lacks true gameplay, leaving the player with only one goal: peel away the skin of the story's onion layer by layer to reveal its core.

The key to understanding the narrative of **The Dark Eye** is to reference the game's tagline, which is a quote from Poe's poem, "A Dream Within a Dream": *Is all we see or seem but a dream within a dream?*

This is because the game world is divided into two states of consciousness: the waking in which all seems mad, or the dream state, in which alternate realities are revealed and the Player Character's perceptions are enhanced to interact with objects and characters in a more metaphysical manner – thus representing the dream within the dream.

Regardless of whether the Player Character is awake or dreaming, the storyline for **The Dark Eye** is conveyed in a collage of cutscenes that are revealed to the player based upon his experiences in the game. These experiences are documented using a phrenology map, which was a popular field of study during the 19th century, in which scientists created psychological profiles of patients. (The game takes place in 1801, which is revealed through a concert pamphlet found inside a dresser drawer.)

The cutscenes encountered in **The Dark Eye** aren't common. Because the Player Character is not shown in the cutscenes, due to his 1st-person POV, the characters encountered are forced to break the 4th wall, or the imaginary wall in which an audience views the story, to interact with the player. This helps immerse the player in the story, but keeps the player unsettled, as he remains uncomfortable not knowing his true identity.

Characters within the game are posed using stop-motion animation. Their faces are molded from gray clay that have blank stares transmitted by eyes with pupils, but no irises, yet another absence of color. This combination creates a nightmarish aesthetic that helps keep the game's presentation horrific, its rogue atmospherics steeped heavily in the macabre.

At its core, **The Dark Eye** is a puzzle game in which the player must kill or be killed. Its atmospheric immersion is peculiar, similar to 80's TV cult classic, *Twin Peaks*. You're never quite sure how the puzzle pieces fit, but you know somehow that they must. A puzzle is a puzzle, after all. It begs to be solved, and so therefore it must. There always is a solution, regardless of how bizarre that solution may be.

Regardless of the complexity of the puzzle, the downfall of the game's story is that there is no room for the player to write his own story. The only freedom is the order in which elements of each story are discovered and accounted for in the Phrenology map.

An even bigger pitfall is that game's story path isn't clear. This leads to the player wasting by interacting with previously encountered objects in an attempt to provide new information, clues, or experiences, when the game should be steadily moving forward.

Instead, the player is forced to backtrack through the game, waiting for old objects to somehow activate, in an effort to advance to the game's next stage.

More in-game clues would have avoided this scenario. The best in-game clue received during gameplay was when the Player Character met Uncle Edwin's assistant in the dining room for dinner. Conversation is sparse and uneasy, until finally the Assistant suggested the Player Character go to bed. I guided the player character back to the bedroom, put out the candle, and guided the player to bed, as it was suggested that I do. This set up a scenario where the Assistant enters the bedroom in the middle of the night to kill the Player Character.

(To win the level, the player must make a soul jump into the Assistant character and kill the Player Character. The player loses the level when he encounters Elise breaking free from a premature burial, gouging her eyes out right in front of him, causing him to lose his sanity, and thus the game.)

Strongest Element

The strongest element of **The Dark Eye** lies in the developer's decision to use the 1st Person perspective for the Player Character. Not knowing the Player Character's name or physical identity upfront normally could be cause for concern. But when the NPC's talk to the player character, and thus break the 4th wall to speak to the player, full immersion is realized, and the player feels as if he were being spoken to directly in the game.

Unsuccessful Element

Though William S. Burroughs gives chilling spoken-word performances for two of Poe's greatest works ("Annabel Lee" and "The Masque of the Red Death"), the latter performance lasted nearly a half an hour. A half-hour cutscene in any game that provides action is too long. In a game based upon advancing the storyline using one cutscene after another to progress the plot, it's too much to ask the player to sit through. The two readings are considered graphic novels because graphic art is used to tell the story alongside Burrough's audio performance. The art is no help. The readings serve as extra exposition without purpose, serving no purpose to advance the game's plot. For this reason, it is the most unsuccessful element of **The Dark Eye**.

Highlight

The highlight of the game was being able to soul jump into the consciousness of Uncle Edwin's Assistant. The player understands from the start that the Assistant isn't friendly. But it's not until the player jumps into the Assistant's body, looks at his own evil form in the mirror, and hears his thoughts, that we know the true nature of the Assistant. When it was revealed that he was a murderer and could end the story by using the hacksaw in the kitchen to murder the Player Character, it gave me chills and goose bumps. Dolby's accompanying soundtrack accentuates the horrific experience.

Critical Reception

The Dark Eye was published in 1995, but it took GameSpot nearly half a year to review the title game, which it finally did in May, 1996. Critic Jeffrey Adam Young gushed at the game's 3D renderings and stop-motion claymation characters, but scorned the game for its documentation's shortcoming in providing a clear player goal, which is true. At IGN, a review of **The Dark Eye** was never written. A score also was never generated. Still, five critics at GameSpot managed to give the game a 6.8 rating, while 56 players cumulatively rated the game at 7.6. The critics at www.oldgames.sk gave the game a 64% positive rating; players rated the game 57%.

Lessons

- The game gets high marks for revealing its backstory and plot advancing clues through heavy interaction with surrounding objects and non-player characters.
- The game gets low marks for the time the player wastes in meandering about the environment waiting for items or characters to become available for interaction.
- The game gets low marks for trying to present a graphic novel in a game format, where it serves no purpose to enhance the gameplay. It was a show-off device.

Summation

Literary fans may rejoice at being able to interact with Edgar Allen Poe's stories in a way that adds visual content to the writer's already vividly horrific stylings. A writer other than Tom Clancy gaining respect from the video game world is rare, and validates Poe's importance to pop culture. But even horror fans (and non-fans of Poe) still can enjoy the ride of this meticulously crafted game, despite its limitations in gameplay, and a few narrative shortcomings. Like most people or creations ahead of their time, **The Dark Eye** was initially misunderstood, and not given a fair shake. However, it's a beautifully realized game that evokes plenty of emotion in the direction of horror and perfectly captures the macabre atmospherics that define Poe's inimitable writing style. In that regard, **The Dark Eye** was a perfect adaptation, capturing the spirit of Edgar Allen Poe, and passing it on to the masses. I cannot recommend the game enough. It is cutting edge and presents a great model in disseminating a game's storyline. Its methods in this regard were ahead of its time, as well.