

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Ghost Trick: Phantom Detective
Platform: Nintendo DS
Genre: Adventure
Release Date: January 11, 2011
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Shu Takumi

Overview

Ghost Trick: Phantom Detective chronicles the story the recently murdered Sissel... or rather, his restless ghost. Initially afflicted with amnesia (described as one of the many nasty side effects of dying), he's given the skinny on his unique, if a bit ghastly, situation by a ghost-possessed table lamp: Sissel has access to the Powers of the Dead, also known as the titular Ghost Tricks. One, he can interact with the ghosts of the recently departed, and go back in time four minutes before their death to try and avert their fate--which he uses immediately to reverse the murder of suspect number one in his own death, a fiery detective named Lynne. He does this with his second Ghost Trick, the ability to access the 'Ghost World', an area that lets Sissel travel freely between mundane, inanimate objects, and manipulate them in attempts to change the situation and save a life. Of course, the Powers of the Dead come with a catch, reveals the ghostly table-lamp, "When the sun rises in the morning, I'm afraid you're going to cease to exist."

When Lynne reveals she can't remember the actual moment in which she gunned down Sissel and sincerely believes his death was not because of her, she also reveals that she herself is investigating something big on this fateful night. Thus, the Ghost and the Detective decide to work together and embark on a nightlong journey reversing the deaths of others, and uncovering a plot bigger than either could have ever imagined.

Characters

- **Sissel** – Our amnesic, ectoplasmic protagonist, whose life is cut short before he can even deliver the game's opening lines, as he's crumpled up in a lifeless heap. He begins as a blank slate, unable to recount even his own name, but as he gets a tighter grasp on his situation, he can start filling in the missing pieces of his memory, often

by interrogating those he's saved with his Ghost Tricks. While his main goal is, rather selfishly, to find out why he was murdered and who was behind it, the motivations of those around him eventually become his own.

- **Lynne** – Lynne's is the first (and third and fourth and fifth) death that Sissel averts. She's a rookie detective with a passion for justice and a penchant for dying, and her fateful encounter with Sissel occurred in the midst of a lead she was following on a very important case—one that wrongly has her mentor and idol on the short list for death row.
- **Detective Jowd and Kamila** – A father and daughter tragically separated before the events depicted in *Ghost Trick* take place, when little Kamila's birthday surprise for her mother makes an "impossible move" and instead shoots the woman to death. Jowd shouldered the responsibility in her stead, and had since been locked away in prison. When his daughter's wellbeing was again put in danger however, Jowd allied himself with Sissel to protect her.
- **Missile** – Kamila's little doggy and self-proclaimed "World's Top Pomeranian", Missile would do anything to protect his mistress—even die (twice). His second death however, results in Ghost Tricks similar to Sissel's, but instead of manipulating objects, he can swap similarly shaped ones, offering a new gameplay mechanic and making him an invaluable partner to Sissel. He possesses an astounding resolve and even chooses to stay dead, believing himself to be more useful to Kamila with Ghost Tricks rather than a corporeal form.
- **Inspector Cabanela** – Jowd's best friend on the force, when they worked together, and Lynne's commanding officer. He's one flashy dude, with a groovy manner of speech and stylish dance moves to match his fashionable attire. He's famous for his spotless record and quick rise to Inspector—traits that are misunderstood to be completely self-serving, however Cabanela wished solely to use his position to study his friend Jowd's curious case, and was the first to suspect unnatural forces at play.
- **The Manipulator, Yomiel** – Yomiel begins the story as a user of Ghost Tricks like Sissel, but with his power allows him to manipulate living objects. He's the ghost of a man hellbent on revenge on those who ruined his life years before the events of *Ghost Trick*—Jowd and his family, and Lynne, putting himself in league with the antagonists. When he's double-crossed, however, he begins to take responsibility for what he has done.
- **The Bad Guys** – A motley crew of assassins, kidnappers, robots, and corrupt foreign nobility, these guys are the main antagonists. Originally in league with Yomiel, they seem to be helping him enact his revenge. In reality, however, they have plans of their own.

Breakdown

In a game where gameplay requires precise timing and the navigation of what breaks down into intricate, pixelated Rube Goldberg machines, it seems fitting that *Ghost Trick's* narrative be one so meticulously pieced together. As such, it's difficult to summarize its elements without dissecting the careful nuance in the writing. The story is split into eighteen chapters, each covering a frame of time--as short as fifteen minutes, or as long as an hour and a half--of Sissel's phantasmal journey to uncover the truth behind his death. His goals to begin with are entirely self-serving, even when Sissel uses his Ghost Tricks to avert the fate of the dead, effectively saving their lives, it's only in the interest of pursuing his own motivations. However, as Sissel saves more lives and gains more information, he finds himself at the center of a plot much bigger than just his own death--and he cares.

Each chapter sees another corpse or two Sissel must go back in time and save, each playing an intricate and imperative part in the story, a theme that closely mirrors the gameplay. When it becomes apparent that some of the deceased were murdered in a non-worldly fashion similar to his own Ghost Tricks, Sissel uncovers a decade long open case on The Manipulator--a ghost that can manipulate living objects. Every unexplained death or circumstance, including the "impossible move" that killed Detective Jowd's wife and Kamila's mother, Lynne's unwilling shooting of Sissel in the opening chapter, and the Head Justice's forced signing of Jowd's death sentence can be attributed to this entity. Adding to the mystery is that this manipulator is walking around in the corpse Sissel thought was his, as well as the fact that Detective Jowd seemed to remember the body's likeness.

With that, Jowd explains his reservations about Sissel, taking the player ten years in the past to the story's originating moment. A criminal, in Sissel's likeness, is on the run, and Jowd is hot on his heels. Before he can apprehend him, this Sissel lookalike named Yomiel, takes a hostage--Lynne, ten years younger. Before either can take a shot, a meteor crashes nearby, and a splintered fragment pierces the criminal's heart, killing him instantly. They resolve to find this Yomiel, who has also kidnapped Kamila.

When they finally manage to track down The Manipulator and the Bad Guys he was working with, in a submarine far below the surface, Yomiel is double-crossed--the real bad guys found the source of his power, a fragment of the meteor that killed him. They take it and destroy the submarine, leaving the gang and Yomiel in the sinking ship. Here, a defeated, bodiless Yomiel corroborates Jowd's flashback. He also owns up to wanting to destroy everyone involved in the incident that killed him, starting with the murder of Jowd's wife, his wrongful imprisonment, and forcing Lynne to shoot his body so that she would be prosecuted for murder. He also confirms that the body Sissel believed was his, was actual Yomiel's.

At this point, Sissel is effectively place back at square one--he knows nothing more of his death, and actually finds out that he was never who he believed he was. But, in a testament truer to the arc of his character than any other part of the game, Sissel continues to search for that truth, but not because what it means to him. Rather, he believes that he can save his new friends by continuing on. Somehow, the three of them--Sissel, Missile, and Yomiel--

manage to relocate Yomiel's lifeless body and Sissel uses his Ghost Tricks to avert one last fate.

Working together using their own unique Ghost Tricks, the three manage to prevent the meteorite killing Yomiel, and in the process, uncover Sissel's real face. He, or she, rather, is Yomiel's pet cat and his only friend since his death, who was accidentally shot when Yomiel manipulated Lynne into shooting him. It's a touching end to the narrative, but really, it didn't matter who or what Sissel ended up being, instead the end was all about the selfless tale of one ghost.

Strongest Element

Without a doubt, the narrative of *Ghost Trick*'s best quality is in its tightly intertwined characters. Because the central theme of *Ghost Trick* is the death, and subsequent reviving, of these characters, their criticalness to the story is put on full display. It's when we can see a blockade to furthering the narrative because a character isn't alive to play their unique and imperative role in the story that the player can fully understand just how vital each and every one of them in *Ghost Trick*'s intricate web is. This is even doubly so, because it's the vibrant cast of characters, like Inspector Cabanela's groovy way of talking, or Missile's doggy talk and constant reminders about him being The World's Top Pomeranian, that truly make up the core of what *Ghost Trick* is all about.

Unsuccessful Element

When it comes to gripes about the narrative of *Ghost Trick*, nearly all of them have to deal with the pace at which the story is told. The first few chapters are a tedious crawl of sparse storytelling, but by far the biggest flaw here is the rapid pace the last couple chapters take. Whereas the beginning and middle of *Ghost Trick* are wrought with questions and few answers, the last moments are so preoccupied with tying up loose ends that they're chockfull of resolutions that could be better served earlier in the narrative.

Highlight

The highlight of the narrative is in the same vein as what *Ghost Trick* does best all along. When the story is finished, and the characters are ready to go back to their new future, the ghost-occupied table lamp that put Sissel on the right path reveals himself by recounting a tale. In an alternate timeline created by Sissel and friends' time traveling, Missile, the world's top Pomeranian, couldn't change anyone's fate. When he came to Sissel for help, she selfishly refused in order to pursue her own mystery. That Missile managed to travel back in time, and waited the ten years out for the events of the fateful night to begin. He then taught the current Sissel under the guise of a table lamp--and also lied about the ultimatum that he would cease to exist in the morning, because that was the only way he would save Kamila and everyone else in time. It perfectly (purr-fectly?) puts Sissel's character in perspective, when we see the selfish fate that could have happened if left to her own devices.

Critical Reception

Daemon Hatfield of IGN gave *Ghost Trick* a score of 8.5, a Great on their scale. He enjoyed the narrative and even describes it as "zany and entertaining", but laments the wordy presentation of the story claiming "sometimes you just want a game to shut up and let you play." In 1up.com's review, *Ghost Trick* received an A, and garnered praise from writer Justin Haywald for its snappy, humorous dialogue. He goes on to say that "the plot twists and cliffhanger chapter endings effortlessly pull you along the convoluted (but easy-to-parse) plot", and mentions that the narrative always keeps you active as a player, "the linear story always leads you exactly where you need to go."

Lessons

- **The arc is everything:** Characters need to evolve throughout the story, especially protagonists. Sissel makes the jump from a largely selfish being to one completely selfless. But it's not just him--Jowd learns to stop feeling sorry for himself, Cabanela learns to put his friends in front of his reputation.
- **It's all about timing:** In a video game, especially one in which the story is conveyed in text, pacing is very, very important. Tell the story you want to, but in a fashion that can best be digested by the player.
- **Something linear can be good, too:** That is, the narrative should fully commit to one side of the spectrum (non-linear) or the other (linear). A lot of dissatisfaction with *Ghost Trick* stems from it's strictly linear storyline, but it's because of that fact that the narrative can be so fastidiously detailed.

Summation

For all the praise that *Ghost Trick* received for its intuitive puzzles and beautifully slick 2D animation, the narrative, the very core of the game that pulls all of the other elements together, seems to be forgotten. The player is taken on a ride on a rollercoaster wrought with twists in turns, both in plot and presentation. *Ghost Trick* is at times hilariously funny and lighthearted, while being tragically woeful at others, and the transition between the two is seamless. And while it's easy to see the scrupulous attention paid to every pixel of the buttery smooth 2D animations, or the complex puzzles, or even it's highly praised soundtrack, it's the meticulous detail poured into the game's narrative that ultimately gives the ghostly world of *Ghost Trick* a breath of life.