

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Monaco: What's Yours is Mine
Platform: Windows, Mac OS X, Xbox 360, Linux
Genre: Stealth Action
Release Date: 24 April 2013
Developer: Pocketwatch Games
Publisher: Majesco Entertainment
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Andy Schatz

Overview

The story of Monaco revolves around a group of criminals who escape from prison and must continue to evade the authorities. Each level represents another “job” (heist) that must be pulled in order to solve some problem. This inevitably leads to some sort of new problem that is solved by pulling another job. The story can be thought of as a series of contexts in which heists can occur.

There are two campaigns in Monaco: “The Locksmith’s Story” and “The Pickpocket’s Story.” Both campaigns tell a completely different series of events, but generally the events of each campaign center on “The Gentleman,” a retired career criminal who serves as a sort of pseudo-boss (in the employer sense) for large portions of the game. He serves as the glue that ties the other characters together. His assets exploits are a common thread that gives purpose to the rest of the cast.

The story is told directly through short dialogues that occur after character selection but before the mission begins. They generally last no longer than about a minute and are all skippable. Each mission typically involves stealing one or more important items from a location, and stealth is encouraged but not technically required. Up to four players may participate in a level.

Characters

The characters of Monaco each represent an iconic character archetype from pop culture. These archetypes were made famous in heist films such as the *Ocean's* series of movies. Although the game never goes into specific detail for each character, one can make assumptions based on small clues given in the dialogue, the art, and the especially the mechanics.

- ⌚ **The Gentleman** – The gentleman is an older criminal with immense wealth and a large body of criminal knowledge. He seems well-acquainted with a life of crime, and shows a complete lack of regard for the police and any authorities. The Gentleman is a selfish, manipulative man, and in the Locksmith’s Story, he manipulates and betrays the original four characters (Locksmith, Lookout, Cleaner, and Pickpocket) in order to gain more money for himself. He leverages their greed to get them to continue doing his jobs, distracting them from their original goal of leaving Monaco. As a player character, The Gentleman is a master of disguise, able to create disguises after hiding for a short time. Also, as an avid car collector, he can enter vehicles faster than other characters.
- ⌚ **The Locksmith** – The Locksmith is, as his name suggests, a master of quickly unlocking all that is locked. This includes safes, doors, and ATM’s. He is depicted as a blue-collar working man and serves as the primary narrator for The Locksmith’s Story, contributing dialogue lines and outside narration. He is often the voice of reason in dialogues with other characters.
- ⌚ **The Pickpocket** – The Pickpocket is skilled at acquiring coins from the level through the use of his pet monkey, Hector. The Pickpocket narrates his own story, just as the Locksmith does. In his story, The Pickpocket is apprehended by the police and recounts the events of the Locksmith’s Story from his own point of view.
- ⌚ **The Lookout** – The Lookout is described by The Locksmith as a “team player.” From a story standpoint, she is more of a minor character, but she is indispensable mechanically. Her abilities allow her to see enemies through fog, move faster than other characters, and enter doors and staircases quickly.
- ⌚ **The Cleaner** – The Cleaner is described as a “psychopath” by The Lookout. He does not speak. At most, the game calls attention to his silence by displaying “...” instead of words. It is also mentioned that he derives pleasure from hurting others, and this shows in his abilities. He is capable of engaging with enemies directly and physically by knocking them out, and he heals his wounds faster than other characters.
- ⌚ **The Mole** – The Mole is one of The Gentleman’s acquaintances (along with The Hacker and The Redhead). He often speaks in the third person, and is childishly optimistic. He often mentions his “Freedom Spoon,” an item that he uses to dig tunnels and break walls. This is his main ability. The Mole can destroy walls and create paths for his team. He can also move through passages more quickly than other characters and can quickly break jewel cases.
- ⌚ **The Hacker** – The Hacker is an acquaintance of The Gentleman, and this seems to be his only allegiance. He is oddly similar to a machine in that he exhibits no personal sense of moral conscience and simply executes orders. As a player character, The Hacker excels at disabling alarms and cameras. He can infect electronics with viruses as well.
- ⌚ **The Redhead** – The Redhead is the seductress of the group. She is a friend of The Gentleman, and is obsessed with diamonds, as evidenced by her seeking diamonds as consolation for her guilt after just killing a man. She is capable of charming enemies, causing them to lose their aggressiveness and even unlock doors for her. She also revives her teammates more quickly than other characters.

Breakdown

The story of Monaco is independent from the narrative. That is to say that the story and narrative have different goals. As stated before, the stories of the two campaigns are largely there to provide reasons for the levels to exist. They are the structural framework for the narrative, and can usually be skipped without losing too much necessary information. Why then, is Monaco so interesting in terms of narrative?

Monaco's narrative is driven by its mechanics. The narrative lives in the minds of the players. It is gradually created and shared between them. For the purposes of this paper, we will assume a best case scenario: a four player game. In a level, the players assume the role of one of the game's eight playable characters and attempt to fulfill the goal of the level (usually stealing one or more important items). Over the course of the level, the actions of the players contribute to an overarching feeling of cooperation. Each player finds that he needs one of the other players, or that one of his teammates is particularly useful. By the end of the level, each player sees the experience as a monument of their cooperation. We will look at this narrative-formation process in more detail.

The narrative begins before the level begins. Players choose a character. The available characters may change from level to level, as it does depend on the story, but there are always at least four to choose from. It helps to think of each character as a simple machine. The team, according to this pattern of thought, would be a complex machine comprised of four simple machines. It has the abilities of the four players, and its actions in the level determine success or failure. Essentially, the team is its own character. More than that, the team is the main character of the narrative.

What makes Monaco unique among team games is the simplicity of the characters. Each character has, at most, one active ability (an ability that requires player input). This makes the characters appear extremely similar. Any character *can* complete a level solo. Since no character is ever *needed*, any use of a character's ability is seen as a bonus. This makes for a situation where having other players close by is fun and interesting, but *not* having other players is not frustrating. But what does this have to do with narrative?

The narrative exists in the minds of the players. It is in the stories that players construct and tell each other. The mechanics of Monaco allow for effective narrative creation. The structure of Monaco's narrative follows a format that I sometimes sum up in one phrase: “___ happened, but ___ was there, so it was all good.” Players all perceive themselves as the “main player,” and they traverse the level using their own abilities. Eventually, they will encounter some situation that is better dealt with by one of their teammates. At that point, there are two possible outcomes. If the teammate is around, the player will call for that person, and their obstacle will be handled quickly and easily. If the other player is not close or cannot otherwise help, the main player will have to deal with the obstacle in a suboptimal manner, cementing their desire to have their teammate around. Games that force players to *need* other players often create narratives of “___ happened, but ___ wasn't there, so we couldn't ___.” Simple characters with slight differences make for an experience in which interpersonal interaction is almost always a plus.

The inner narrative of Monaco becomes increasingly apparent when one listens to the audible words of players. Players constantly call out what they can do, and they are constantly reminded of what their teammates can do. The players not only feel powerful on their own, but the level becomes a tale of the prowess of the actual main character: the *team*. The characters are blank slates. They operate like costumes for players to don and tell stories about each other without too much distraction.

Strongest Element

The most powerful element of the narrative is the way that the game incentivizes teamwork without requiring it. This casts a positive light on one's teammates. Players are quick to talk about the skill and ability of their team. Rather than being a bumbling tumbleweed of dependencies, it is a powerful multi-limbed criminal capable of amazing feats. Each level creates a mood of "what will we do next?" instead of "how will we manage this?" The team is characterized by the exploits of its members, and since each character has only one main active ability, it is easy to see the advantages of one's teammates, and thereby experience the nature of one's team.

Unsuccessful Element

Unfortunately, we have indeed been looking at the narrative of Monaco from an ideal perspective. Without a team, the narrative falls short. Players are stuck wishing that they had a team. Each lock makes the player long for a Locksmith. Each guard conjures desires for a Cleaner or Redhead. The narrative of Monaco relies on each player marveling at the power of the team. With no team—or rather, a team of one—this satisfaction is lost.

Highlight

The highlight of a level of Monaco is the occasion when the team makes a mistake. Whenever an alarm is tripped or a guard notices the team, the pace of the narrative ramps up drastically. The job is compromised. At this point, the abilities of the players are more than bonuses. They are lifesavers. Technically, any player is more than capable of hiding on their own until the alarm dies down or the guards give up, but being rescued by a teammate is more dramatic. The game still dodges the issue of forcing players to need each other, and the situation becomes more compelling. There is no feeling like being caught by a camera on one's way out after stealing precious jewels, only to have The Hacker shut the security system down, then escape through a passageway dug by The Mole. The story simply writes itself.

Critical Reception

Most reviews of this game tend to overlook the story. GiantBomb's Alex Navarro gave the game a 4 out of 5, stating that "The story is cutely written, meting out pieces of info that simultaneously flesh out the stories of the game's characters, and pay homage to a few of the all-time crime movie classics." While this statement is true, it does nothing to show that the true narrative of Monaco is in the gameplay.

Marty Sliva of IGN gave Monaco a 9.0, and had a bit more to say about the story. He stated: “The wide variety of objectives is key in conveying the surprisingly intricate story. Fans of The Third Man, Reservoir Dogs, and The Usual Suspects will find a lot of great homages and storytelling devices.” However, he hints at the existence of mechanics-driven narrative: “Their inherent talents make replaying levels a joy... This all culminates with a wonderfully satisfying suite of missions that defy expectations and deliver immense payoffs.”

Lessons

Monaco is a lesson in mechanics-driven narrative. With it, we can lay out a few guidelines on how to implement such a narrative in a game.

- 🕒 Lesson 1 – Independence: Let players act on their own volition. They should do what they *want* to do.
- 🕒 Lesson 2 – Simplicity: Mechanical narratives are driven by a series of actions and reactions. Players should be able to instantly understand what is going on in their narrative (“I did this, then he did this, then I...”).
- 🕒 Lesson 3 – Scale: Players should feel like they are making a serious impact on the game world. The story of Monaco comes into play here. Heists are cool and empowering experiences. Provide a context that makes the narrative interesting without distracting the player.
- 🕒 Lesson 4 – Community: Other players help create a shared narrative. If the game is multiplayer, encourage interaction but do not require it.

Summation

Monaco is an amazing experience because it represents a relatively uncommon flavor of narrative. It is player-focused. It is the “party game” of narratives, focusing on created mental stories over grand plots. Players are free to hop into the overalls of The Locksmith or the suit of The Gentleman and pull a heist with their friends. Each level tells a unique story. Characters are simple but interact in interesting ways. Teamwork is encouraged without being forced. In the end, each level provides each player with a new tale of debauchery to tell. More games should attempt this. Sometimes the players write the best stories. The Steam Workshop is a testament to this.