

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Until Dawn
Platform: PS4
Genre: Interactive Drama/Survival Horror
Release Date: August 25, 2015
Developer: Supermassive Games
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Will Byles

Overview

Until Dawn is an interactive survival horror game that prides itself on two major things: choices and the use of horror clichés. The narrative is told through alternating perspectives between eight different playable characters, any of which can die (and one who always will). In February of 2014, a group of ten friends took their annual vacation to the Washington Lodge on Blackwood Mountain. The majority of the group, who knows of Hannah Washington's crush on class president Mike Munroe, set up a prank, effectively taking advantage of her attraction and humiliating her in front of everyone. Embarrassed and ashamed, she runs out of the lodge and into the snowstorm, her twin sister Beth following after her. Upon reaching her sister, the two hear a distinctly inhuman screech from behind them, and immediately find themselves racing deeper into the woods. Cornered by this unseen threat, the twins are forced over the cliff, having never been found by authorities and declared as missing.

A year later, the twins have still yet to be found, and their brother, Josh, has invited everyone back to Washington Lodge to gather together on the anniversary of their disappearance. He declares his hope that this will serve as a good way to remember his sisters, and shares it with a casual video, seemingly unconcerned and somewhat unaffected by the disconcerting request. As the group makes their return to the lodge, it isn't long before everything begins to fall apart. The group knows they are not alone on the mountain, under the impression that a psycho maniac is messing with them. With another snowstorm looming over them, they have no choice but to wait until dawn for help to arrive.

While the events at the lodge are exclusively a result of Josh's doing as a ploy to seek revenge for his sisters, there is more to the story than meets the eye. *Until Dawn's* special

twist exists in the form of a second side to the narrative, which contains a much more grave threat. Whereas Josh never intended to truly kill anyone, Native American lore emerges in the form of the Wendigo and their insatiable craving for human flesh. With movement-based vision, heightened strength and speed, and the ability to withstand the cold without any hindrances, the Wendigo make up the real threat that puts everyone's lives at risk.

Characters

MAIN CHARACTERS

- **Sam Giddings-** *“Oh, yes. She’s a feisty one, I’ll grant you that. But I really don’t see what’s not to like. Perhaps she intimidates you...she’s pretty, strong...”*

Sam represents the adventurous “hero” of the story. As Hannah’s best friend, she was the only one to actively discourage the prank on Hannah, making her the most likeable at the start. Brave and considerate, Sam is always the most rational and level-headed of the group, often displaying the most self-control to act against violence. Diligent, she cannot die until the very last section of the game, and is also responsible for the survival for at least half of the group. Lastly, she is the one to convey the most useful and straightforward information to the police about the situation, urging them to investigate the mines.

- **Michael Munroe-** *“Well I can’t blame you there- he is a bit of a...jerk. Better keep your eye on him. Don’t let his smug bravado spoil your game...Well, let’s see what happens with Mike...”*

Mike is the charming, attractive, and intelligent class president who is the all-around “big guy”. Catching the attention of a number of the female characters gives the impression of a persuasive jock. Having originally taken advantage of Hannah’s attraction by being the bait in the prank, he starts out as the typical egotistical jerk. However, his experience steadily transforms him into another “hero” type, as he is the one who ultimately puts together the plan that saves everyone in the end. Despite his initial poor impression, he is also as self-sacrificing as he is driven, often putting himself at risk for others and even potentially blowing himself up to eliminate the Wendigo.

- **Jessica Riley-** *“Jess is cute, and perhaps a little stupid, but you-you don’t need to worry about her now when she is out of the way. Just focus on the others.”*

As the supposedly confident “homecoming queen”, Jessica is unsurprisingly a little dim-witted, but she is trusting. She has the role of the dumb blonde, prioritizing beauty over brains and often holding an irreverent view towards more serious matters. As Mike’s new girlfriend, there is an inevitable tension between her and his ex, Emily.

- **Chris Hartley-** *“I guess you think he’s getting what he deserves. You think the way you feel about him justifies the terrible trauma that he’ll soon go through...now why would you think that?”*

As the “nerd/class clown” of the group, Chris is rather humorous, often smiling and cracking jokes to lighten the mood whenever possible. This does not hinder his methodical nature, which keeps him focused on whatever task is at hand. Because of his crush on Ashley, he is also protective, often expressing his desire to keep her out of harm’s way, which may or may not be trumped by his loyalty to his best friend, Josh.

- **Ashley Brown-** *“I guess you think she’s getting what she deserves. You think the way you feel about her justifies the terrible trauma she is about to go through...now why would you think that?”*

Ashley’s qualities paint her as the academic “nice girl”. More serious than the rest, she is inquisitive and determined to work out logical solutions to seemingly supernatural occurrences. She comes across as more of a meek character, comfortable around her friends, but easy to frighten. This causes her to have a more innocent sort of association in addition to her forthright character. She returns Chris’s feelings.

- **Matt Taylor-** *“Oh, but he’s such a nice guy, I don’t see what’s not to like. Perhaps he intimidates you? He’s big, strong, handsome...”*

Matt is, without a doubt, the undeniable “dumb jock”. As the title would suggest, he is active as a result of his athletic background. As Emily’s new boyfriend, he is ambitious in his intentions to make everyone happy, but there is a clear and constant tension underlying their relationship due to her history with Mike. Even so, he is motivated to do well, trying his best to appease her by going along with her suggestions (demands). True to his stereotype, he learns very little along the way, stuck in the mine shaft for almost the entire game and learning next to nothing about the situation at hand.

- **Emily Davis-** *“...a bit too bitchy for your test? Often a lack of confidence manifests itself as over-confidence, think about that. Is that not just a bit like...you?”*

Easily the most dislikeable character in the game, Emily has the role of the selfish witch. She instigates arguments and was a large proponent in carrying out the prank. She seems to still harbor some old feelings for Mike, implying that her relationship with Matt is more for show. Her persuasive nature often leads others (Matt in particular) to do things her way. While trapped in the mine shaft, she handles herself well, showing just how resourceful she can be even when the odds are stacked up against her. Despite her intelligence, she remains extremely dislikeable with her aggressive attitude and tendency to lash out.

- **Joshua Washington-** *“Ah, full of surprises. I think I’m beginning to understand you far better now...don’t be too hard on Joshua, he’s been through so much. But you know that already, don’t you?”*

Said to be very loving, it is no surprise that Josh cared deeply for his sisters. Struggling to cope with their disappearance while simultaneously battling his mental illnesses, Josh easily twists into one of the most complex characters. However, he has tried his best to handle his grieving process with as little help as possible, only occasionally confiding in Sam, and thus being marked as the “loner” of the group. Although he predictably turns out to be the one constructing the prank and tormenting his closest friends, his story still manages to exist on a much more elaborate level than many of the other characters. He is also described to be thoughtful, which is indicative of his internal battle through attributes clashing with his actions.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

- **Hannah Washington-** One of the twins, Hannah is known for her intense crush and borderline obsession with Mike. After falling from the cliff, she survived in the mine shaft for weeks before succumbing to hunger and resorting to eat her sister’s corpse. Doing so transformed her into a Wendigo hosting the spirit of the Makkapitew (the strongest), and for most of the game, she is the biggest threat and tormentor for the rest of the group.
- **Beth Washington-** As the other twin, Beth chased after Hannah into the snowstorm, but she did not survive the fall from the cliff.
- **Dr. Hill “The Analyst”-** Originally Josh’s psychiatrist, Dr. Hill is representative as the voice of reason at certain points in the game. Dr. Hill himself never actually makes an appearance in the game, existing only as a figment of Josh’s imagination due to his hallucinations. Because of this, his character is warped by Josh’s perception to later not only blame Josh for the pain he has caused, but also resent him for it. In doing so, he mimics the self-loathing behavior Josh has and turns it toward him.
- **Flamethrower Guy-** Initially seen around the mountain following the protagonists, he comes across as threatening, almost always wielding a machete and wearing heavy clothing that obscures his identity. On the night of the prank, he was trying to trap the final, strongest Wendigo. He came across the twins and reached a hand out to them, but he was unable to save them. The Flamethrower Guy is a cliché in his own right as a harbinger of impending death. He survives on the mountain for years on his own, steadily battling the Wendigo and trapping them one by one, all until he confronts the protagonists to warn them of the real threat. Minutes later, he dies, having never even been named.
- **Wendigo-** The real threat on Blackwood Mountain. The wendigo spirit possesses any individual who resorts to cannibalism on the mountain, causing them to transform into a massive creature with spider-like movements and heightened strength/speed. Unbeknownst to the general public, the Wendigo first emerged when a group of miners disturbed the mountain in 1952.

- **The Makkapitew**- The “alpha” of the Wendigo. Larger, stronger, and more intelligent than the rest, the Makkapitew is capable of taking down other Wendigo with little effort. The Flamethrower Guy killed the Makkapitew on the night of the prank, hoping to get to Hannah and Beth in time to save them, but the spirit then went into Hannah’s body later on while she was trapped in the mine shaft.

Breakdown

Upfront and honest about its intentions to toy with horror cliches, the opening of the game alone is indicative enough over demonstrating the extent at which tropes are incorporated. Take the setting. A group of drama-fueled teens meet up on the anniversary of a tragedy, in a lodge that is essentially a cabin in the woods, built over an abandoned hotel with dark tunnels leading to a decrepit sanatorium, next to an old mine shaft where people died, and all on top of Native American ground. All with no cell service and no way off the mountain aside from taking the cable car. The cherry on top? There’s yet another snowstorm. This combination practically demands an eye-roll, but that’s one of the reasons why *Until Dawn* is so enjoyable. It doesn’t pretend to be something it’s not. It stays honest with the players.

As every character is introduced, the player is shown three attributes to describe them (underlined above). Almost immediately, the player is given a sense as to what sort of character they are in control of: the jock, the prom queen, the geek, etc. Knowing the stereotypes that suit those characters plays into how choices are made later. For instance, while Jessica and Mike are in the mine, it logically feels right to have Mike pick the ‘heroic’ option by jumping down to join Jessica. It just seems like the sort of “strong man” type of response he would have. As expected, the characters have a mix of emotions when they first see each other. Everyone has new relationships and their own identities that cause them to respond to each other in unique ways that suit their supposed stereotype. The first “choice” occurs when Sam arrives at the cable car station. There, she is confronted with decision to either snoop through Chris’s bag or zip it up. In the long run of the game, this decision is rather meaningless. But that’s because it’s the first one. The purpose of it is to introduce the player to **The Butterfly Effect**.

As a game about choices, everything the player does or says as a given character will alter the how that individual is perceived by the others. Teeming with rich attention to detail, aspects such as selected dialogue, relationship statuses, actions, the collection of clues, and the completion of quick time events (QTE’s) all play a role in determining what path the story takes. All the major decisions are outlined along a set of twenty-two butterflies in the menu screen, each one following a set of consequences that have stemmed from one of the player’s actions. The brilliance of this screen is that the player can see exactly how their decisions play out. Every action that influenced the results are directly listed in a chain that leaves no question as to how they got there. That being said, if certain decisions didn’t need to pan out because other steps were taken that led to different paths, players would still be able to pinpoint certain areas that may have held more ambiguity or weight.

Visual cues also help to keep track of when important decisions have been made. Whenever the player does something that changes the narrative in some way, a group of butterflies will quickly shoot across the screen from the top-left corner. This is an incredibly elegant, yet effective way to get the point across. Without interrupting the flow of the game at all, the butterflies mark each of those moments as significant, pushing the player to not only remember what it is they did, but also force them to think about how it will impact the game later. This contributes to creating an environment where the player feels like their actions constantly matter every step of the way, all while enforcing the imagery of the butterflies to hammer in the butterfly effect.

Within a few hours of arriving at the lodge, the group separates. Emily and Matt split off to locate her missing bag at the station, Jessica and Mike leave in search of the guest cabin so they can be alone, and Ashley, Chris, and Josh decide to hold a séance with a spirit board (yet another cliché), and Sam heads upstairs to take a bath. At this point, the perspectives begin to alternate with the different characters in each location, allowing the player to get a feel for each of them as well as being given some time to explore. Around this time, the player becomes much more familiar with the collectibles for the game: totems and clues.

The totems themselves play a massive role in building the atmosphere of the game. Picking up a totem offers small flashbacks for a potential future occurrence in one of five categories, denoted by color: death (black), loss (brown), danger (red), guidance (yellow), and fortune (white). Death totems will show the potential death for the character who picked up the totem while loss shows the death of a friend. Guidance offers a hint at a decision vital in keeping characters alive. Danger and fortune show a mix of events, some of which are unavoidable. Danger may show events that elicit more care, but fortune only shows glimpses that reflect the results of good decisions. Because of this, fortune does not seem to really be beneficial in decision making, however, offering another category that is relatively positive helps to eliminate the sense that totems only bring bad news. Thus, they are viewed more with curiosity than a sense of dread. They give the player a small hint of what is to come without explaining any of the details or context. Doing so adds both suspense and drama by constantly reminding the player that something big is going to happen without any knowledge of when it will be, thus keeping players wary and on their toes in anticipation.

Before long, the player is confronted with what is perhaps of one the most memorable moments in the game: choosing to save Ashley or Josh from their death by picking who will be sawed in half. No matter who is chosen, it will always veer towards Josh. This scene is just one example of the unapologetically brutal death scenes that occur in this game. Even though it later revealed that Josh had used a prop filled with pig intestines and blood, it sets the tone of the story to be much darker, demanding the player's full attention and forcing them to comprehend what it is they think they have just done. While Ashley, Sam, and Chris are at the lodge, victim to Josh's gruesome and elaborate prank, the rest of the group faces another fear: the Wendigo. At this point, the player typically isn't aware that there are actually multiple threats. It's not terribly difficult to put together with the right context clues, but it's easy to go along with the "psycho killer" trail that is

being spun so clearly. Because of this, most people do suspect Josh. Not only does he give off uncomfortable vibes while seeming very awkward in general, but he is also the only one with a definitive motive- revenge for his sisters. Focused on Josh, it isn't surprising when he reveals himself to be alive. There is a moment of satisfaction at having guessed the right answer, but it is also followed by a dull disappointment at it being so obvious. This is where the story takes a turn.

Despite every cliché being thrown into the mix, the reveal of the Wendigo still managed to emerge relatively unexpected while Josh was garnering all of the attention. It marks the moment where things get a lot more interesting, and it also opens up a lot of questions pertaining to Josh's own character.

Josh's revenge plot focuses almost entirely on three people: Chris, Sam, and Ashley. Even within that group, Chris seems to be the one who really draws the short end of the stick. Ashley is helplessly dragged into these situations and is forced to just experience it all. Sam is frightened and perhaps captured, but nothing else happens. With Chris, however, not only is he the one forced to choose between saving his crush or his best friend, but he is also then forced to "shoot" either Ashley or himself. This might make sense if he had been a large proponent in the prank with Hannah, but he was the least involved. Sam tried to stop the prank, and Chris was drunk and passed out on the counter. Despite this, these two characters still take the brunt of Josh's targeting. Meanwhile, Matt recorded the event, Jessica and Emily planned it, and Mike took advantage of Hannah's attraction to him. Although, Emily and Matt did return to the cable car station to find it destroyed, that is massively tame by comparison to supposedly watching your best friend be sawed in half while you stand helplessly. While Ashley technically contributed with the prank, she was more of a tag-along, described by Chris as a "willful participant". So, although those four other characters were actually dealing with the real threat (the Wendigos), they were otherwise widely untouched by Josh's plans. One could say that Josh intended to get to them later, but he seemed perfectly content to reveal his identity and plan for the ultimate horror film. These things combined seem to imply that he was, in fact, just about finished with his own prank.

So why did Josh target the people he did? It's made obvious that he struggles with mental illness. In particular, schizophrenia, which causes him to grapple with making distinctions between reality and fantasy. However, his hallucinations and severe impairment with reality at certain points also indicate that he experiences psychosis, specifically starting after the disappearance of his sisters. This combination usually includes depression as a symptom or side effect, but per the medical reports located in his workshop, that is all he was being treated for, clearly indicating that he was not getting the help he needed. This isn't uncommon either, as psychiatric disorders often do have several overlapping symptoms, so misdiagnosis isn't unusual. Since a withdrawal from or struggle with social interaction also tends to emerge, this leads to the only possible explanation for Josh's decisions. Because of his cognitive problems and inability to be able to fully grasp reality, he could not comprehend the extent of how his actions would affect them. Josh is torn between wanting to avenge his sisters while craving the thought of bringing his friends together again. He even tells Sam early on that Chris and Ashley

would need tragedy to bring them together. He provided that, and if both Chris and Ashley make it out (with Chris not shooting her to save himself), it succeeds. These clashing intentions form his character. He cannot comprehend because he doesn't have the choice or ability to do so. Hence why his struggle for control is made so abundantly clear when he hysterically exclaims, "I *did* something! I *made* you believe in the world I created and I showed you parts of yourself you were too afraid to visit". Josh fears isolation. Yet as much as he needs help, he is filled with self-loathing, blaming himself for the death of Hannah and Beth, inevitably feeling selfish at the notion of requiring assistance.

Josh is easily the most complex character of the game. Even the chapter titles are centered around him. There are two options for each of the ten chapters, all dependent on his thoughts or the actions he drives people to do.

1. Memento Mori/Friendship
2. Jealousy/Darkness
3. Isolation/Haunted
4. Loyalty/Malevolence
5. Dread/Prey
6. Vengeance/Psychosis
7. Violence/Loss
8. Revelation/Animus
9. Despair/Karma
10. Repentance/Resolution

They are subtle touches, but the most significant one is chapter ten. In his final "official" session with Dr. Hill, he finally comes to the realization that the night his sisters disappeared was simply the unfortunate result of a stupid mistake from his friends. He has the option to say, "I'm so sorry". It becomes fitting, then, that the final chapter which becomes titled "Repentance" entails his demise. Regardless of any of the player's choices, there are simply none left for Josh.

It is later revealed that, while trapped alive in the bottom of the mine, Hannah had lasted thirty days before she resorted to digging up Beth's body and eating it. Having been consumed by the spirit of the Makkapitew, she ends up being the biggest threat. If Josh does not recognize her, she kills him immediately, but if he does, she recognizes him saying her name and pulls him back deeper into the mines where he too, starves and turns into a Wendigo. Minutes until dawn, most of the survivors are surrounded by Wendigos inside the lodge. A quick plan between Mike and Sam entails the two buying time for the rest to get out of the house before they blow it up using the severed gas line from the fireplace and a broken bulb. All or none may survive, but no matter what, Josh is always left behind.

Strongest Element

The inclusion of the “Don’t Move” element in the controls is an undoubtedly phenomenal addition for a horror game. It is hilariously and ironically entertaining that some of the most anxiety-inducing areas in the game come from moments where the player must hold absolutely still and do nothing. There are several different things that help to enforce the success of this mechanic. For one, it is never unexpected. By the time it becomes vital for characters to survive, the player is already familiar with it and has had some practice. They not only become accustomed to the sort of setting where the success is crucial, but they have ample time to move into a position that will be comfortable before the cue appears on the screen, therefore avoiding an unexpected failure at the start and extreme frustration because the results felt unjustified. The fact that this setting is conveyed in a way that players can effortlessly pick up on alone is a massive success. After learning that the Wendigos have movement-based vision and that any hiding sequence will trigger this, players can come to expect it and prepare accordingly.

Secondly, the Wendigos themselves have a very daunting and intimidating presence. Since none of the characters can kill them without fire, the Wendigos instill a nerve-racking fear because they cannot merely be taken down. So it is worth noting that a good chunk of the game’s intensity comes from knowing that the goal isn’t to conquer or vanquish these creatures; it’s just to survive the night. Close proximity to a Wendigo with no choice but to hide and stay still then forces the player into a position of extreme vulnerability because there is absolutely nothing they can do to defend themselves. Save for, of course, blowing up a house. The audio contributes to the growing tension as well. As if those moments weren’t already heart-pounding, the quickening sound of a heart beat plays in the background, telling of the severity of the situation with its steadily increasing tempo and volume. In addition to these things, purposely having to stay still mimics the response that people often have while watching a horror film. In the event of an approaching threat, there is this general desire to stay as still as possible in hopes that somehow it will make a difference. In *Until Dawn*, it does. It holds the potential to not only save characters, but really bring to life the fulfillment of that scenario, and it is so satisfying when it does.

Unsuccessful Element

Like most games with collectibles, the player is rewarded for exploration. This is done through the placement of both clues and totems. However, the exploration is also one of the largest drawbacks. There are more than a few instances in the game where wandering into a certain area will trigger the next section of the game, effectively (and sometimes unexpectedly) cutting the player off from the previous area. The problem with this is that it is often unclear what action will trigger this, which can rather easily force the player to almost ignore the missed clues. Beyond that, this can often entail the player deliberately moving passed extra paths, either trying to skim the entire area first or thinking the spots they skipped were the areas that were going to progress the game. This leads to a lot of frustration because the player often knows they’ve missed something, but they cannot go back. Because the collection of clues plays a large role in putting together the details of the story, this is a big problem. In some cases, it makes sense to block off a certain area due to pressing circumstances. That being said, in sections of the game that do not operate on a time limit, it would be helpful if the player could do a little backtracking.

The camera movement is usually telling of what sections will move the game forward, as the camera tends to follow the general direction of the correct path. Many of the totems/clues tend to be located off said path, thus rewarding the player for going out of their way to thoroughly look around the area. The problem here is that this is also inconsistent at times. For the major clues (i.e. Beth's head, Hannah's journal), this process is reversed, likely to help guarantee that the player will find them. Even so, having the inconsistency means that solely using the camera angles/movement is not a reliable process.

Highlight

There is one standout scene that is undeniably unforgettable and absolutely incredible, and that is Josh's breakdown. Up until this moment, Josh has been steadily going downhill throughout the game, struggling more and more to tell the difference between what is real and what is fantasy. Having suddenly stopped taking his meds (though they were not enough to begin with), Josh begins to feel the full effects, yet again undergoing psychosis as his hallucinations become more integrated into his reality than ever. It is here that the player begins to see the extent at which he grapples for control through his futile attempts to comprehend just what is happening around him.

This is the exact moment where it becomes startlingly clear how much he blames himself for the death of his sisters. The entire area around him transforms to show the world from his perspective: an ever-changing incomprehensible mass of senseless monstrosities. Tormented by the death of his sisters, Hannah and Beth appear, rotting and decayed, demanding to know why Josh didn't save them. As much as he tries to escape, he can't. Every direction he walks in leads to a confrontation with another horror. Fractions of dialogue splinter through his pleas to be left alone with the terrified screams of his friends as a result of the antics of his prank. He begins to acknowledge what it is he has done to them, and slammed all at once with the gravity of his mistakes.

It is worth mentioning that the song "Frère Jacques" is sung by Hannah and Beth in the background. Sure, on one hand, Josh has a personal tie to it because it was the very same song that was playing in the music box he bought for Hannah as a Christmas present. But it goes deeper than that. The English translation of the song reads:

*Are you sleeping? Are you sleeping?
Brother John, Brother John,
Morning bells are ringing! Morning bells are ringing!
Ding, dang, dong. Ding, dang, dong.*

The song is about a friar who overslept. The words urge him to wake up to do his job by ringing the bells for morning mass. This is a parallel of the night of the prank, where Josh was passed out on the counter and thus unable to aid his sisters. He hates himself for this, and it also comes out in the way he hallucinates Dr. Hill's sessions. Hill says to him, "I don't know which is worse, actively triggering events that lead to someone's death, or passively allowing a tragedy to occur...because you couldn't lift a god damned figure to

help someone else”. Knowing that this Hill is a hallucination, however, only means that this is Josh talking to himself.

Up until now, Josh is the only character the player has not had a chance to control. By waiting until now, it completely changes the player’s view of him. After his initial identity reveal with the prank, he takes on the role of the villain. Despite his grief and struggles, it seems incomprehensible how he could possibly put his friends through such terror. But after seeing this scene and his desperate grapple for control as he cries, “You can’t tell me what to do, you can’t tell me what to do anymore”, this anger turns to pity. Waiting until now to show the player his perspective brings them to a place of understanding through prolonging the encounter for a greater impact. To so effectively alter the perception of this character and bring about this level of complexity in a single, short section is nothing less than phenomenal.

Critical Reception

Among the reviews that *Until Dawn* has received, there appears to be a unanimous acknowledgement and appreciation for the extent at which the player’s choices matter. In particular, Jeff Marchiafava, writing for Game Informer, makes note of the direct way consequences are conveyed: “Numerous feedback techniques highlight the importance of your decisions (including the Butterfly Effect menu that tracks various choices and their consequences), but none are more effective than the swift decapitation of your character, or any number of equally brutal death sequences.” This sentiment serves as the general consensus, but it does also lead to another aspect of the game that is widely discussed. That is the inability for the player to go back and change their decisions without replaying either the whole game or a multitude of chapters after having already beaten it. This was touched upon by Philip Kollar from Polygon, who said claimed that some of the deaths “felt arbitrary”. Even so, he respected this element as a design choice, stating that it “helps ensure a wider variety of outcomes”, therefore making it “a game worth discussing with friends who are also playing”. In the end, *Until Dawn* received a 9/10 from Game Informer, a 6.5/10 from Polygon, a 7.5/10 from IGN, and held a rating of 79 out of 100 on Metacritic. In addition to this, *Until Dawn* also won “Best Horror Game” at the 2015 Global Game Awards and was nominated for “PlayStation Game of the Year” at the 2015 Golden Joystick Awards.

Lessons

- **Lesson 1: Balance the high-adrenaline moments with calmer sequences in between to give the player a break and not wear out the intensity-** In between every chapter, the players find themselves in the office of the Analyst, Dr. Hill. These areas of the game offer no major threat to fear, and for the first half, primarily consist of answering questions. Since the player does not initially realize they are controlling Josh, they answer the questions to their own taste, usually pertaining to fears, opinions, and judgement towards the other characters. This offers the chance for the player to catch their breath and take a temporary reprieve before diving back into the fray. It is also crucial that games (especially

- in horror) do not operate on high intensity all the time, as this can simply become the norm and lose its impact.
- **Lesson 2: Make sure the consequences of the player's choices cover a variety of effects ranging from subtle to monumental-** In a game centered around the significance of decisions, this is crucial. While players want to know their decisions matter, they also want to be surprised. For this reason, creating a mix of consequences that are intertwined in interesting ways creates a more fulfilling experience due to the unexpected connections and results. This combination therefore helps to shape an environment that urges the player to think carefully and work through the process without feeling entirely discontent with the results.
 - **Lesson 3: Promote character interactions to build upon the development of each individual character and give the player a reason to care-** *Until Dawn* places quite a bit of emphasis on how the characters interact with each other. But it extends far beyond just how they communicate. Granting specific characters the ability to alter the fates of the others is a massive contribution to their development. For example, towards the end of the game, Mike may be faced with the dilemma of deciding whether he should shoot Emily. The entire group is in a state of paranoia and uncertain about what to do with Emily, who has been bit by a Wendigo. As Emily is widely viewed as the worst character due to her unreasonable tendencies, most people likely would not be opposed if she had to die. The significance of her death would change drastically if it were at the hands of Mike, her ex, in cold blood. It would mean something different. The player can change Mike by taking him to a place he can't get back from or choosing to back down, thus creating the opportunity for more interesting choices.
 - **Lesson 4: When implementing a unique mechanic or method, allow the player to mess up first so they can learn how to utilize it-** For one, the "Don't Move" cues made for an easy concept to grasp, but happened to be unfamiliar as a mechanic. Before they ever come into play as vital, however, the player undergoes two instances where they cannot proceed until they have gone through it correctly: feeding a squirrel and holding a flashlight. They are simple, sure, but forcing the player to successfully complete them ensures that they know exactly what to expect. These learning sections also tell them that while they are first beginning, it is okay to make mistakes. It's only the beginning.

Summation

With its impressive attention to detail, *Until Dawn* explores the freedom of choice and self-agency to craft a more complex narrative that envelopes the player in an environment that feels organic in its ability to change. The replayability brings to the table the potential for different narratives each time, offering and encouraging experimentation. Although it is flawed with sometimes awkward lines of dialogue, slightly frustrating camera angles, and exploration that could use some polishing, this is made up for with the phenomenal choice system and the elegant organization of information. The appreciation and admiration held towards reinventing the clichés to once again be interesting is both fun to acknowledge and respectable. The atmosphere remains immersive and intriguing, working well in conjunction with the melodic score, and the

care spent on developing rich characters out of stereotypes is easily one of the highlights of the game. The experience is undeniably a good one, and it is one well worth sharing with friends.