

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number

Platform: Microsoft Windows, Mac OS X, Linux, PS3, PS4, PS Vita, Android

Genre: Top-Down Shooter

Release Date: March 10, 2015

Developer: Dennaton Games, Abstraction Games

Publisher: Devolver Digital

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Jonatan Söderström, Dennis Wedin

Overview

Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number is the second entry in the series of the neo-noir style games surrounding the masked murders that occurred in the first entry. Compared to the first entry's focus on a single character's murderous rampage, Hotline Miami 2 shifts between a variety of characters related to themes of ultraviolence and misguided sensationalism. All of these characters are presented with differing motives, but all are products of the dilapidated society they live in.

The central plot of the game develops around the player gradually uncovering the conspiracies of a secret nationalist organization, called 50 Blessings. This organization leaves codified messages on answer machines of its operatives to order them to conduct violent raids for furthering the organizations anti-Russian goals. It is with this organization that all characters become intertwined with each other to set the backdrop for Hotline Miami 2.

Characters

- **Martin Brown** – A famous actor that plays the role of a psychopathic killer in the in-game fictional film, 'Midnight Animal', inspired by the masked murders of 1989. He is of a large imposing build, depicted with a pig mask for his role in the film. He has revealed his intentions to use the film as a means to live out his fantasies of violence and is notable for embodying a blurring of fiction and reality.

- **The Fans** – A group of five veterans that idolize the character known as Jacket, responsible for the 1989 masked murders. Each member wears an animal mask reminiscent of the masks worn by Jacket. Whether out of boredom or nationalistic revenge, the fans engage in murderous activities aimed at the Russian Mafia, continuing Jacket's legacy.
- **Jake** – A big neo-confederate war veteran that harbors hatred towards Russians due to the US's defeat to them in war. He is shown to be aggressive with a somewhat pure desire to kill Russians.
- **Manny Pardo** – A stereotypical hardboiled detective that has secret desires for attention and fame. As a result, he leads a double life. One as a cynical cop that despises the depravity of the world, and another as a murderer, known as the Miami Mutilator, that seeks fame through the very means he claims to despise.
- **Evan Wright** – A former war-journalist turned writer that obsesses over uncovering the truth of the masked murders to complete his book. He is seen to dive in head first, engaging in non-lethal combat, to seek out first-hand sources. He is also seen to be morally conflicted for prioritizing his desires to make money off of sensationalizing violence over being present for his family.
- **Richter Berg** – Returning from the first game, Richter in Hotline Miami 2 is a fugitive for his crimes as one of the masked murderers. He is notable for his wearing a rat-mask in combat and the portrayal of him as a loving son caring for his ill mother. Richter, throughout the game, is seen to be compliant to authority while exhibiting fatalist tendencies.
- **The Son** – As the ambitious new boss of the Russian Mafia and the son of the former boss, the Son is eager to bring the Russians back in control. He is wary of the prospect of meeting the same demise as his father, while still struggling to meet his self-imposed expectations to make his non-existent father proud. Despite being in an authoritative position to give orders, the Son is still controlled, if not misguided, by his father's legacy.
- **The Henchman** – As the henchman of the Son, he obeys the orders given to him by the Son. Though, the henchman begins to express retirement towards his work. The henchman shows contrasting characters to the Son in his desires to leave behind the commotion of his distraction filled life. In his death, the henchman confesses that he just wants to go home.
- **Beard** – Another returning character from the first entry, Beard is a war veteran of the Soviet-American War. Beard is no exception to the other characters in that his actions are not dictated by his own will, but he shows a rare characteristic of

acceptance. By relinquishing any desire for control over his life, Beard appears to be the most content with his life, even in the face of his unfortunate demise.

- **The General (suggested founder of 50 Blessings)** – A former leader of Beard's unit, the General is shown to be worn out by the fruitless war efforts. It is strongly suggested that the General, carrying over resentment towards the war, founds the 50 Blessings organization. The General and 50 Blessing's beliefs can be best summarized with his statement, "No will of our own, just mindless obedience!... Destruction and violence... it's just part of our nature."
- **Richard** – A curious character that appears to most of the characters, as if in a dream or hallucination. It is never clearly mentioned who or what Richard is but he is frequently linked to a warning, possibly a voice of reason, accompanied by a blurring of the lines between reality and fiction. Considering how Richard is a non-judgmental entity that asks self-illuminating questions, it is my belief that he is a manifestation of each characters most honest internal self.

Breakdown

Upon completing Hotline Miami 2, the player is presented with a nuclear explosion that consumes and kills most, if not all, of the major characters. I expect many to have had varying emotional responses. Mine were predominantly confusion and futility, confusion as to why any of this happened and futility for how my investment in the game seemed fruitless. However, rather than dismiss the ending as being a let down, further inspection suggests that such vanity may be the core of the story the creators' were trying to tell. Therein lies the brilliance of the game's melding of player experience with the message of Hotline Miami 2's narrative. In essence, Hotline Miami 2's narrative is an insightful critique on the dangers of contemporary media riddled with sensationalism and mindless consumption.

Hotline Miami 2 presents itself as a neo-noir style game that features unapologetic violence and moral decay set to the backdrop of a crime filled Miami. With fast-paced action rewarded with flashy visuals of violence and adrenaline fueled audio, the gameplay inundates the player with titillating stimulation that drives the player throughout the experience. As for the story, Hotline Miami 2 takes a closer look at the events transpiring the masked murders of the first entry, specifically of the fallout of such violence in a dilapidated world. Following the story of a variety of different characters with differing motivations, the game illustrates a dystopic world in its final moments through multiple perspectives. It is in these characters that the developers have left warnings, with themes of the reduction of humanity, perpetuation of moral decay, misguidance through a lack of introspection, for the player to contemplate on what rampant consumption of titillating media can do to a society.

Among the frequently visited themes in *Hotline Miami 2*, one prevalent one is the reduction of humanity to its primal urges. The central antagonist and entity of control is the nationalist organization, 50 Blessings. 50 Blessings is most notable for providing animal masks and leaving cryptic voice messages to convince, coerce, or threaten playable characters, and by extension the player, into slaughtering people for the organization's benefit. In *Hotline Miami 2*, the characters Richter Berg and Jake fall into this ploy. With drastically different motivations, Richter caring for his mother and Jake being a nationalist himself, these two characters still end up becoming pawns doing 50 Blessings' bidding. Specifically, Richter, shows a stark contrast in his portrayal between the first and second entry. While Richter is revealed as a caring person who became an unfortunate victim to 50 Blessings, the first entry in the series aptly shows how from an outsider Richter is merely an obedient killer with no free will. Whatever the initial motivation was to join 50 Blessings, these characters soon find themselves swayed by the appeal to their deep desires into a routine cycle of slaughter where they start to enjoy the violence or, at the very least, become desensitized to it. This transition, not so subtly, parallels the actions of the player playing a violent game. It is as if the game lets the player experience for themselves that being given a mask to seal away one's fear for social prejudice and with a slight push in the right direction, even the most innocuous of people can be reduced to their primal urges to kill.

Another theme that branches off of the appeal towards a reduction of life's complexities to instinctual desires is how contagiously these desires can manifest themselves if not kept in check. Unique to *Hotline Miami 2*, the game showcases the perpetuating legacy of the 1989 masked murders in the form of imitators and media creators. The fact that media, which has such a large impact on society, thrives off of selling salacious content creates a self-sustaining cycle of violence giving birth to greater acts of moral degradation. The game provides straightforward instances of such perpetuation through the Fans, and Manny Pardo. The Fans idolize the 1989 murders and imitate the acts of violence for the thrill and fame, but the game asserts that they all pay the price for their careless actions through an untimely death. Similarly, Pardo exemplifies a desire for fame and attention that materializes as him committing violent, yet consciously staged, crimes to trigger the media's attention. Interestingly, Pardo's desperate attempts for attention showcases an ironic lack of attention in a society driven by sensationalist media.

Further expanding to the media creators, the game makes a statement on the flaws of media in how Martin Brown and Evan Wright create media in their respective fields to simplify reality into an easily consumed format intended to monetize on tragic, yet tantalizing events. Evan Wright shows some signs of guilt for taking advantage of the frenzy over violence, but he soon returns to his obsessions. Despite all of these characters' vested interest in the masked murders, the original intentions are lost through corruption, blinded by ulterior motives driven by selfishness.

What perhaps is the core issue that Hotline Miami 2 addresses to the player is the importance of introspection in fear of misguidance. In the dystopic world of Hotline Miami, most characters fail to be introspective. Ever so frequently, the characters' lack insight into their motives and as Richard put it, "without directions a lot of people wind up going round in circles". The game makes an interesting case of this through the example of the Son and the Henchman. Both men are in distinct positions, one in an authoritative position seeking greater control and the other trying to leave it all behind for a simple life. However, when both men come close to achieving their goals, they come to a realization that they have no idea what they are trying to do and end up seeking out distractions introduced as a powerful hallucinogenic drug. The game makes it clear that regardless of one's stature, without a direction, they will get lost.

As a counterpoint to the majority of characters, Hotline Miami 2 does provide a possible solution to its dystopic world in fatalism. Most outstanding is Beard, who appears to be the most content with his life, with his accepting things as they come to him as he says, "things never turn out the way you expect them to". A similar message is conveyed in Richter's final dialogue after receiving news of his imminent death, since there is nothing anyone can do about it, there is "no need to fight it then".

Though the fatalist approach is the solution presented to the player by the developers, I find this to be the developers further establishing Hotline Miami's dystopia as a world that is too far gone. Once the world has reached that state, there is nothing anyone can do except for acceptance. However, this is not true for us, the players being exposed to this fictional reality. Hotline Miami 2 allows the player to experience the final moments of a world that has already passed from multiple vantage points and constructs a narrative to serve as a warning for a society that may be following in the same footsteps. Through the player's personal experience of playing through a game that disguises itself as the very media that it warns against, the game warns of the dangers of our misguided desires to fulfill primal urges and how this can feed into the even larger systemic danger of unchecked sensationalism.

Strongest Element

The strongest element in Hotline Miami 2 is the conveyance of a complex idea through the subversion of the player's expectations. Hotline Miami 2 utilizes the established game mechanics requiring fast reflexive actions rewarded with gratuitous violence to prime the player with excitement and satisfaction over killing. But by the game's ending, the game subverts the sense of fun with a heavy-handed message of futility. It is at this point that player behavior may diverge, but the game provides an opportunity for the player to re-evaluate their actions to discover a larger meaning. For a game to have complex goals as directly addressing the player and constructing an understanding of a society of social decay, I find it incredible how the gameplay serves to prepare the player to be in the ideal state of mind to receive an idea for the greatest impact.

Unsuccessful Element

Even if a game has a deeply intriguing narrative, it will not make a lasting impact on the player unless the narrative is successfully delivered and it is with this narrative clarity that *Hotline Miami 2* suffers. Having revisited narrative points and analyzing clues, it is clear that all the content is present, but the game never presents the narrative as a necessary component for experiencing the game. Many of the crucial narrative elements are hidden away in secret side quests or in minor details in the levels that can easily be overlooked. In addition, the non-linear narrative presentation is great at conveying an atmosphere and telling a story to evoke emotions, but it is not as successful in allowing the player to understand the story. With these limitations, *Hotline Miami 2* risk being exclusive by design as it limits the narrative engagement to those willing to dig deeper and figure the story out. Furthermore, given the convoluted nature of the narrative, the gratuitous violence in the gameplay can serve as a double edged sword that can both prime the player for narrative impact as well as allow players to dismiss the game as just a violent game.

Highlight

The highlight of *Hotline Miami 2* has to be the intro sequence that appears when replaying the game after completing the main story campaign. This is a scene where all the major characters in the game are sitting around a table with Richard at the center conversing with each of them. After each exchange, the character Richard talked to is replaced with their corpses in whatever state their death in the main game has left them. The dialogue between Richard and each character is short, but it sheds light onto each character's narrative arcs as well as serving as the greatest hint to who Richard might be. In my case, I interpret Richard as the voice of introspection from the dialogue that takes place in this sequence. Finally, it is in this sequence that Richard's dialogue can be interpreted as both being addressed to the characters and the player, the primary example being, "You all came back, huh? Why? You all know how this ends, don't you?".

Critical Reception

Overall, *Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number* has been received as an ambitious departure from the first entry. The narrative, with the non-linear structure, is seen to be ambiguous and requiring a commitment to piece together, but it has been seen as a commitment worth making. Giving 8.5 out of 10 from Polygon, Griffin McElroy states about the narrative, "You have to work to make the game's stars align, but it's work that's totally worth doing."¹ Jim Sterling, giving it an 8 out of 10, says "The narrative comes off as wholly disjointed, but in a deliberate way, creating a dissonance that never allows the player to feel truly comfortable with the sequence of events unfolding... It's

¹ McElroy, Griffin. *HOTLINE MIAMI 2 - WRONG NUMBER REVIEW: A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE*. <http://www.polygon.com/2015/3/10/8177615/hotline-miami-2-wrong-number-review-pc>. Polygon. 2015.

calculatedly disconcerting.²" Steven Burns from the VideoGamer gave it a 7 out of 10, stating that "Dennaton expertly conjures a deeply unsettling world with little more than a few talking heads, some ordinary environments, and some clever character crossovers.³"

Lessons

- **Lesson 1:** Gameplay can be used to prime players to receive the same narrative in different ways. A game experience can be drastically enhanced by having a narrative that complements the gameplay to the point that the gameplay can serve as a transitional vessel for delivering the narrative. Hotline Miami 2 can be seen as a prime example where the gameplay's existence enhances the tangibility of the issues the game is trying to subvert.
- **Lesson 2:** If there is a reason to believe there is greater meaning, such as a subversion of expectation, curiosity can be leveraged to have players dig deeper. This allows developers to create a well flowing game experience that delivers just enough to trigger a player's interest, without having to be bogged down by trying to clutter the gameplay with all the narrative. Hotline Miami 2 can be played through with as little and as much narrative content depending on the player's desire for narrative as most of the narrative depth is not presented as a forced dialogue sequence. This flexibility is definitely an admirable trait.
- **Lesson 3:** With a convoluted narrative comes the risk of the narrative not getting across. Be aware of such risks. The non-linear narrative sequence, the hiding of significant narrative elements in branching paths, and placing narrative clues in seemingly mundane scenes is a means to tell story that worked well for many people. However, there is the risk that these narrative elements can be overlooked.

Summation

Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number is a game that stands as one of the pinnacle examples of Ludonarrative consonance. The game establishes an exhilarating entry point through its gameplay that is satisfying at any degree of narrative engagement. Hotline Miami 2's narrative is cleverly told to inspire curiosity, while leaving behind all the pieces for the player to piece together an ever giving story. With both of these elements combined, Hotline Miami 2 exposes the player to a narratively rich world that depicts a dystopic world and warning of the dangers of what may become of our society.

² Sterling, Jim. Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number Review – Videogame Nasty.

<http://www.thejimquisition.com/hotline-miami-2-wrong-number-review-videogame-nasty/>. 2015.

³ Burns, Steven. Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number Review. <https://www.videogamer.com/reviews/hotline-miami-2-wrong-number-review>. 2015.