

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Zero Escape: Zero Time Dilemma
Platform: Nintendo 3DS, PlayStation Vita
Genre: Room Escape
Release Date: June 28, 2016
Developer: Chunsoft
Publisher: Aksys Games
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Kotaro Uchikoshi

Overview

Zero Time Dilemma, the third game in the *Zero Escape* series, makes use of non-chronological storytelling, alternate timelines, amnesia, and branching paths to create a dreamlike game experience like no other. By building on concepts introduced in the previous two titles, *Zero Time Dilemma* invites us to partake in a trilogy-ending finale that will keep even the savviest players guessing where it's going to go next.

Characters

- JUNPEI – The player avatar from 999, he is one of the nine participants of the Nonary Game in *Zero Time Dilemma* as well. After the bloody events of 999, he became aloof and disconnected from the world around him, and now doesn't care about much of anything.
- AKANE – Junpei's childhood friend and one of the Nonary Game participants in both 999 and *Zero Time Dilemma*. At the end of 999, she is revealed to be the mastermind behind the Nonary Game's events, and proceeds to go into hiding to execute the next step of her plan.
- SIGMA – The protagonist of *Virtue's Last Reward*. Sigma sent his consciousness back in time 70 years to participate in *Zero Time Dilemma*'s edition of the Nonary Game.
- PHI – A mysterious friend of Sigma's who is also from the future.
- ZERO THE SECOND – The masked figure behind *Zero Time Dilemma*'s events. He offers the participants moral choices with deadly consequences.

Breakdown

Explaining the plot of *Zero Time Dilemma*, the third game in the *Zero Escape* series, to someone who hasn't played the first two entries, is a bit... complicated.

A synopsis of a game written for *sane people* might start by giving you a bit of background on who you'll be playing as, when the story takes place, what the context of the conflict is, and what force drives the action forward.

Zero Time Dilemma lacks simple answers to all of these questions; part of the game's brilliance comes from the way it builds on concepts introduced in its predecessors, *999* and *Virtue's Last Reward*. So, to adequately describe just what the hell is going on in this labyrinthine Sort-of-Visual-Novel-But-Not-Really released for Nintendo 3DS earlier this year, we have to go back and analyze what made the first two games so special.

I like to describe *999* as *Phoenix Wright* meets *And Then There Were None* meets *Saw*. Nine strangers are kidnapped and forced to participate in the convoluted "Nonary Game" by a mysterious masked entity who calls himself Zero. The player's role is twofold: solve puzzle rooms that allow the participants to advance through the Nonary Game, and make decisions as to which puzzle rooms they'll enter. These decisions branch the plot off into several paths which each terminate in one of nine endings... eight of which end in *lots* of death.

As the player works their way through these plot branches, what appears to be an Agatha Christie-style mystery about the relationships between these kidnapped strangers reveals itself to be a philosophical web of metaphysics on the nature of consciousness, culminating in an epic scene where one character has a life-saving epiphany of knowledge that the player obtained from *an alternate branch of the game's plot*. In the game's climax, it is revealed that its plot branches exist in parallel, and that certain special people, in situations of extreme stress, have the ability to shift their consciousness between these timelines.

The second game in the series, *Virtue's Last Reward*, doesn't pull any punches; timeline-hopping is a core mechanic. The player has full ability to jump through a flowchart of the game's paths at will, using knowledge obtained in one branch to solve problems in other branches as they work their way through yet another Nonary Game. Because it assumes that its players have already worked their way through the first game, *Virtue's Last Reward* doesn't talk down to them by reusing the same twist. Instead, it picks up where *999* left off and ups the ante from there.

Touching on concepts like the Prisoner's Dilemma, Schrodinger's Cat, and the Chinese Room, *Virtue's Last Reward* is a delight to play through for sci-fi nerds like me, and just like its predecessor, it nails the ending by raising the metaphysical stakes even higher. It turns out, unbeknownst to some of its characters, that *Virtue's Last Reward* takes place

several decades after 999, and that the game's entire series of events was plotted by the protagonist, Sigma, who sent his Old Man Consciousness back through time into Young Sigma's body, forcing Young Sigma's consciousness into Old Future Sigma's body to participate in the Nonary Game, and then be sent back into Young Sigma's body to live out his entire life, plan the Nonary Game, and then close the loop by jumping back into Young Sigma's Body to complete his mission of changing the future by participating in a different Nonary Game taking place at a facility in Nevada researching the psychological effects of living on Mars.

Phew.

...if that sounds complicated, don't worry, the game gives you a diagram to make sense of it all.



Which finally brings us to *Zero Time Dilemma*, a game that doesn't waste your time by explaining any of this to you. Obviously you've played the first two, right?

Of course you have. *Zero Time Dilemma* knows what you know, and it isn't going to make you sit through two hours of buildup to get to the juicy bits. The game starts by thrusting you into your first decision: heads or tails? Guess correctly, and you get to go free: your group is released from their prison and free to live out their lives. Roll credits. (Yes, the game literally rolls the end credits five minutes after you've begun.)

Guess incorrectly... and the real game begins.

Unlike the previous titles, which followed the perspective of one character, *Zero Time Dilemma* follows the viewpoints of three isolated teams of people locked within the same huge facility. The game's branching paths aren't affected by making one simple decision;

the choices you make across all three teams determine the story. This interesting design choice alone would be enough to justify a sequel for most games, but *Zero Time Dilemma* goes further by doing away with the idea of a linearly-told story to begin with. The game's sections are split up into fragments, small hour-long chunks of time which begin with a team waking up, involve you solving a puzzle room and making a big choice, and then end with the team's memories of that particular fragment being wiped as they're put back to sleep. These fragments are unorganized; the player can choose between any of them on the menu screen without any idea what they might entail.

We have to take a minute to appreciate this. Taking into account how this series of games has built on itself since the first title, we can *finally* really think about the ramifications of all of these story concepts working in conjunction with one another.

When you start playing a fragment in *Zero Time Dilemma*, you have no idea when it's taking place. Is this the first time this team has woken up? How many members of the other teams are alive? What decisions that I've made previously will affect this fragment? What timeline is this even happening in? Are some of the characters aware of events happening in other timelines?

This uncertainty creates an effect that makes playing *Zero Time Dilemma* feel like dreaming, which in turn makes for a super unique narrative style that feels really suitable for a handheld due to its being able to be played in short bursts.

The game enhances this dreamlike feeling by giving us the most melodramatic scenes in the *Zero Escape* series to date; characters will become enraged and lose all sanity at the drop of a hat, threatening murder while symphonic music blares in the background. Even some of the dialogue feels a bit more forced than in the previous titles, and whether it's intentional or not, the game showing these almost soap-opera-like moments with a straight face is extremely surreal.

Despite feeling cheesy sometimes, because of how meta the game's story is, *it works*. Choices are presented as life-or-death decisions that will have a severe impact on the characters, and while that's true within the context of that particular scene, the choices are totally irrelevant within the context of the full story. The player goes from watching a melodramatically heartbreaking cutscene play out as a result of them choosing Option A, and is then encouraged through UI decisions to immediately go back and choose Option B to watch the *other* cutscene. There aren't *actually* any choices to be made; the omniscient player has to go down every branch of the game eventually anyway.

As you work your way *Zero Time Dilemma*, the characters start to become aware of how much their reality is crumbling due to convolutedness, which works as a perfect metaphor for how the player feels while playing the game. The best example of this, which can thematically sum up the entire *Zero Escape* series, is a scene where a character named Diane is praised for her earlier decision to not betray another team.

“But did I really not betray them?” she asks. “I don’t remember. I honestly don’t remember what I chose.”

Neither do I, Diane. Neither do I.

Strongest Element

The strongest element of *Zero Time Dilemma* is its escalation of concepts explored in its predecessors to create a game experience that keeps even the savviest players guessing.

Unsuccessful Element

While the melodramatic cutscenes *do* contribute to the game’s dreamlike atmosphere, this often feels unintentional; a few bits of awkward dialogue here and there feel out of place. This is probably a result of localization and the way in which dialogue tends to be delivered in Japanese entertainment compared to Western entertainment. (This is somewhat reminiscent of *Deadly Premonition*, another Japanese game with stilted cutscenes that sort of fit the game’s odd atmosphere.)

Highlight

I love fourth wall-breaking moments, and *Zero Time Dilemma* is chock full of them. My personal favorite is when the player chooses to have Carlos, a kindhearted, pacifistic firefighter, press a button that kills the other two teams to eliminate them from the game. His teammates confront him, asking why he would do such a horrible thing. His response:

“I don’t know. I have no idea why I pressed that button... it’s like I was being controlled. Like something took my hand and forced me to...”

Critical Reception

Destructoid – DJ Andriessen – 9.5

IGN – Michael Koczwara – 9.2

Polygon – Allegra Frank – 8.0

All three sites praised the game as being a worthy finale for the *Zero Escape* series that wraps up plotlines set up in the prior two installments. The awkward animation and strangely-“filmed” cutscenes were criticized as distracting from the game’s excellent writing.

Lessons

- Lesson 1: Don’t question your players’ intelligence; in a plot-heavy game, they’re going to have played the previous titles and will be caught up on the story going in. No need to repeat the same “twists” from previous games!
- Lesson 2: Games are a unique medium in that the player is an active participant in the story; tastefully breaking the fourth wall can immerse the player into the

universe even more while encouraging them to apply the story's themes to their own life. For maximum effect, this should be done in a thematically rich way that fits within the game's fiction, rather than simply implemented by making a joke about how "this is a game!"

- Lesson 3: Sometimes, less is more; the previous two installments of the *Zero Escape* series didn't have fully-animated cutscenes, and they may have been all the better for it. *Zero Time Dilemma*'s awkward animation distracts from the story.

Summation

As other critics have said, *Zero Time Dilemma* is the fantastic conclusion that the *Zero Escape* series deserves. It builds on concepts introduced in its predecessors to tell a complex sci-fi story that the player's brain will incessantly chew on even after the final credits have rolled.