

Game Narrative Review

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Genre: Adventure Game, Puzzle Video Game

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Developer: Tequila Works, Cavalier Game Studios

Publisher: Tequila Works

Game Writers/Developers: Narrative Director Tim Griffiths, Design Director Charles Griffiths, Technical Director Tom Lansdale

Overview

The Sexy Brutale, a luxurious casino mansion, is stuck in a time loop. Over the course of a single day all of the guests are murdered by casino staff. At midnight the same gruesome day starts over. Who knows how many times the cycle had repeated before Lafcadio Boone—who would have died first—wakes up, released from the bonds of time by the mysterious Bloody Girl. Granted the ability to reverse time, Lafcadio must find a way to save all of the hotel guests.

This is the plot on the surface, anyway; what truly happened at The Sexy Brutale is much different. Lucas Bondes, Marquis and owner of The Sexy Brutale, attempted to burn down the mansion for the insurance but made a grave mistake. A flaw in his plan led to the deaths of all of the casino's occupants—including those of his wife and unborn child—and nearly killed him as well. Now a broken man, he relives the night over and over in his mind, warping and distorting events to maximize his grief. Can he ever learn to forgive himself and move on, or is he fated to live out his days trapped in a distorted memory?

Characters

Main Characters

- **Lafcadio Boone (Player)** - A priest and old friend of the Marquis. The Bloody Girl pulled him out of the time loop in order to rescue his friends. He used to be a gambling addict; in fact he was the previous owner of The Sexy Brutale, losing it to the Marquis in a game of roulette. Now reformed, he is a father figure to the Marquis and is well respected among the guests. It is revealed later in the game that the real Lafcadio died in the fire along with the other guests; the

player instead controls The Marquis masquerading as his trusted friend as he struggles to cope with what he's done.

- **Lucas Bondes (The Marquis)** - The mysterious owner of The Sexy Brutale. A gambling addict, he won his casino in a risky game of roulette. As business faltered, however, he engaged in the riskiest gamble of all: burning down his casino for the insurance money. In a tragic mistake, the fire began early and killed the mansion's other occupants, including Lucas's wife and unborn child. Lucas was the only survivor; in his guilt he chose to relive the night of their deaths over and over again, leading to the time loop present in the game.
- **The Bloody Girl** - A mysterious helper who pulled Lafcadio out of the time loop so that he could save the other guests in the casino. She is later revealed to embody Eleanor Bondes, Lucas's wife, the voice of compassion and empathy inside his mind. Although she is only Lucas's memory of Eleanor, she represents his hidden desire to move on and let go.

The Guests

- **Reginald Sixpence "The Clockwork Baron"** - Clockmaker and mechanic, Reginald has a special connection with all the clocks in The Sexy Brutale. The game hints heavily that he may have unknowingly contributed to the design of the bombs Lucas used to start the fire. His watch allows Lafcadio to travel through time, and his mask, obtained once his life is saved, makes it possible to start the day at any clock in the mansion. He dies around 3:45pm in the chapel.
- **Clay Rockridge "The Brute In A Suit"** - He used to be head of security at The Sexy Brutale, and met his wife Trinity there when he caught her cheating at cards. He enjoys gambling and alcohol, though he always abstains when it is time to work. These vices become his downfall in the time loop, however; he dies at 10:35pm celebrating a blackjack win with a "victory shot" poisoned with spider venom. Concurrently, the very same spider is devouring his wife in a separate room. His mask is not useful to Lafcadio but if Reginald lives he can save Trinity.
- **Trinity Carrington "The Moth by Moonlight"** - She works as a sculptor at the mansion, creating its beautiful statues and fireplaces. She's blind, which gifts her with exceptional hearing and tactile senses. She's eaten by a giant spider at 11:05pm, but if she's rescued, her mask greatly enhances Lafcadio's hearing.
- **Willow Blue "The Flame in the Dark"** - An antique collector for the Marquis and voodoo practitioner on the side. Her special candles enable her to talk to spirits in the mansion; a particularly nasty one, a demon, compels her to hang herself from the mansion bell at 6:50pm. Her mask grants Lafcadio the ability to speak with spirits.
- **Tequila Belle "The Southern Siren"** - A well known singer with a beautiful voice. Rumor says she's the Marquis's ex-girlfriend, but they're still on good terms. She dies at 7:35pm when her voice shatters a large glass window behind her. Her mask grants Lafcadio the ability to shatter glass with his voice.
- **Greyson Grayson "The Lightfingered Locksmith"** - A talented thief before joining The Sexy Brutale as security advisor. In his heyday as a criminal he was arrested trying to steal a gilded masterpiece called the Moloch Egg, and rumor has it that the Marquis bought it and hid it in the mansion as a practical joke. He's close friends with Redd Rockridge; they die around the same time (Greyson dies at 10:45pm) in the mansion when Greyson is impaled by spikes and Redd is electrocuted in a futile attempt to save him. His mask grants Lafcadio the ability to unlock mechanical locks around the mansion.

- **Redd Rockridge “The Gentle Goliath”** - Ex-croupier in the casino and talented musician, he’s Tequila’s favorite piano accompanist. He’s the brawniest character in the game, capable of great feats of physical strength. He appears to fancy Greyson but has never confessed his feelings. He dies at 10:10pm attempting to wrench open the electrified cage trapping Greyson. His mask is not useful but he is instrumental in helping Lafcadio save Greyson.
- **Aurum Runes “The Midas Giant”** - Goldsmith at The Sexy Brutale. He has a heart problem caused by years of metal work. He is loyal to his friend Thanos Gorecki, helping him with a desperate plan to help Lucas during the time loop. He dies at 11:00pm upon burning in a furnace. His mask is not useful but he and Thanos are saved at the same time.
- **Thanos Gorecki “The Blueprint Prince”** - Architect at The Sexy Brutale. Consequently, he knows all about the secret hideaways and contraptions scattered throughout the mansion. He is a cranky wheelchair-ridden man who’s suspicions regarding the staff go unheeded. He dies at 11:10pm after burning in a furnace alongside Aurum. His mask grants Lafcadio the ability to learn secrets of rooms in the mansion.

Other Characters

- **Eleanor “Ellie” Bondes** - Wife of the Marquis. She loved gardening and painting and used both of these skills to beautify The Sexy Brutale. She was pregnant at the time of her death; in fact, it was her pregnancy that inspired Lucas to burn down the mansion so he could make a new start with Eleanor and the baby. In the time loop, her memory takes the form of The Bloody Girl, a manifestation of Lucas’s desire to move on.
- **The Gold Skull** - The physical embodiment of Lucas’s self-hatred and guilt, The Gold Skull perpetuates the time loop so that Lucas will never forget his friends who died the night of the fire. He believes that Lucas should never forgive himself and should be forced to watch his friends die over and over again as punishment for his misdeeds.
- **The King in Red** - A very old man kept alive in a crude life-support chamber. His tears of blood fuel a nightmare engine that re-starts the time loop day after day, causing him eternal anguish. He is the part of Lucas that endures his punishment.

Breakdown

“Time to move on, old man.”

This is the first and last spoken line in the game, advice given by the mysterious Bloody Girl. The first time it’s cryptic, ostensibly spoken to player character Lafcadio Boone, but as it returns in the game’s emotional finale, its meaning is crystal clear. The mansion and its endlessly looping day are products of a broken man’s grief and regret. He alone can choose to end the cycle of despair and move on.

If the casino is a product of The Marquis’s distorted memory, then how much of what the player sees is real? Can they trust anything they see? Armed with these questions, one can break down the events in the mansion—truth and fiction—to see what they reveal about The Marquis.

This truth and fiction motif meshes very well with the masquerade theming of the game. Every character in the mansion—Lafcadio included—wears a mask in preparation for a masked ball. These masks simultaneously conceal and reveal the true nature of each character and play a key role in the game mechanics. As Lafcadio collects masks from characters he saves, he is granted abilities related to that character's personality. On the other hand, these masks are what trap characters in their time loops, stupefying and subduing them into repeating the same ill-fated tasks over and over again. Only in removing these masks are they free. Thus they obscure and reveal, ensnare and empower. This tension of revelation through obfuscation permeates the entirety of the game, appearing in every puzzle the player faces.

The tutorial section of the game alludes heavily to the fire that burned down the casino. Lafcadio wakes up in a daze near a fireplace, surrounded by glowing particles reminiscent of embers. Later, if he examines the fireplace, the inspection text reads, "The fire is roaring. Its intensity causes your heart to race." As Lafcadio gets close to other characters, his mask bursts into flames in warning. As the end of the day approaches, his pocketwatch is sheathed in fire. Finally, as the guests he must save are introduced through beautifully executed splash images, their portraits burn away into cinders.

In spite of his true fiery demise, we see Reginald Sixpence, the first victim, gunned down. His actions leading up to his death, however, hint to how he actually died. He opens a safe, dismayed to discover what he's looking for has been replaced with garbage. With later knowledge of the game, one can surmise the missing object is one of the bombs Lucas used to burn down the mansion. When he discovers it is missing his fears regarding Lucas's plans are confirmed. When cornered in the chapel, he says, "Lucas, what have you done?" This line speaks to the events of the fire, not what happens in the time loop. Placed near the beginning of the game, this is one of the first clues that suggests that there is more in the casino than meets the eye.

The next murder comes with some similar cryptic lines. Lafcadio must save Trinity Carrington and Clay Rockridge, husband and wife. Without Clay's intervention, Trinity will be eaten by a giant spider. Clay will also die of poison if he never leaves his game of blackjack to save Trinity. His impending doom is readily apparent to the player; he takes shots from a roulette wheel unaware that the final shot is a foreboding red instead of blue. After every shot he advances the wheel and the poison inches closer. If he drinks it, both his and Trinity's fates are sealed. The mansion tries in futility to warn him; a card dealing robot at the blackjack table indirectly warns him to save Trinity, saying, "CLAY. HELP HER," then, "CLAY. SHE NEEDS YOU. YOU HAVE TO SEE," and finally, "YOU NEED TO SEE." These messages serve only to unnerve Clay, who seems oblivious to the warnings. After Trinity is attacked it says "VERY WELL CLAY. YOU MADE YOUR CHOICE." If this fictional version of the mansion is Lucas's subconscious, perhaps the robot's warnings further underscore the tragedy that befell his friends. Clay's decision to stay at the blackjack table parallels Lucas's decision to burn down the mansion; he made an ill-advised gamble that led to the death of those he loved most.

Next is Willow Blue, who has decided to investigate her friend Tequila's disturbing dreams. She finds the source of the nightmares: it's a harmless looking guppy concealed in a secret room adjacent to

Tequila's. He's Grinmaw, a voodoo demon, who has been whispering to Tequila through the wall, whispers which contribute to Tequila's demise later. Determined to save Tequila, Willow confronts Grinmaw but is no match for his power; he psychically compels her to hang herself. Her final lines speak very much to Lucas's own desires: sad and alone, she speaks to unknown persons before jumping to her death. "I'm coming now," she says, "I've missed you all so much. I can't wait to see you." This feels like Lucas's own subconscious emerging in Willow's dialogue, a manifestation of his desire to take his own life in order to reunite with those he's lost.

Tequila is supposed to practice with her favorite piano accompanist Redd Rockridge but he never arrives. Instead, a member of the staff begins to play a song she doesn't want to sing, a jealous song about Lucas which appeared in the nightmares conjured by Grinmaw. During a key high note, her voice shatters the stained glass behind her, mortally wounding her in the resulting shower of glass. The staff dump her bleeding body down a garbage chute to be fed to a giant spider, indirectly contributing to Trinity's encounter with the same spider soon after. Lafcadio can prevent her death by locking the replacement pianist in a closet and playing a different song for her himself. It's interesting that Lafcadio is supposedly a gifted pianist; this may be another hint that Lafcadio is really Lucas, for it is revealed that Lucas used to play piano for Tequila regularly. The jealous song that kills her is also very relevant in that it focuses on time, how her time was wasted, how it is too late to do anything now. This is indeed how Lucas must feel while watching her; it is too late to save the people he loves, and all he can do now is endure the cruel loop he's created for himself. Some of the most important lines in this section occur after Tequila's been saved. The Bloody Girl appears, telling Lafcadio, "Sometimes we have to hurt people to help them move on." She then apologizes to Lafcadio and pushes him out the window, sobbing. These lines are clearly addressed to Lucas, whom she encourages to move on over and over again over the course of the game. His fall out the window mirrors Lucas's real-life leap out of the clock tower as the mansion burned, foreshadowing the game's climax later.

Redd and Greyson are first seen at the theater investigating what appears to be a priceless object placed conspicuously on the stage. Greyson thinks it might be the Moloch Egg, a beautiful gilded masterpiece he's been pursuing for years. As claims his prize, shackles bind his hands to the egg and a staff member closes an electrified cage around him. A disembodied announcer's voice says the show has begun, a "Showcase of Illusions." Spikes begin to descend from the ceiling as Greyson struggles to escape. His best friend Redd endeavors to save him, attempting to cut power to the cage. Unsuccessful, Redd tries to open the cage with his bare hands and is promptly fried by the electricity. Greyson helplessly apologizes to his friend who has died in an effort to save him as the spikes make their final descent. This exchange feels like a metaphor Lucas's current existence, a tortured old man trapped in a psychological prison of his own making. It is indeed a "showcase of illusions," a false and exaggerated reality in which Lucas must watch his friends die, apologizing in futility while waiting for old age to claim him.

Wheelchair-bound Thanos is the only guest who seems to notice at the beginning of the day that something is wrong—he doesn't recognize the staff members and Lucas is nowhere to be found. He convinces his friend Aurum to help him unlock a secret elevator he believes will lead to Lucas. What he doesn't realize is that the elevator security code has been tampered with. The elevator doubles as a

furnace, so when they enter the elevator using the wrong code they are burned to death. Their deaths elegantly mirror how they actually died. Since they are the last guests Lafcadio saves, it appears that through saving guests Lafcadio inches closer to the truth. Aurum's last lines, which include the phrase "it feels warm in here," are potentially similar to what he actually said near the end. If Lafcadio saves Aurum and Thanos they thank him, requesting that he find and help Lucas. Aurum adds, "That boy loves you, Laffy. Looks up to you, you know? Even with his crazy riches, he still has a soul needs saving." This line may explain why Lucas chooses to embody Lafcadio; he is a respected father figure who managed to turn his own life around. Lucas hopes to do the very same thing by distancing himself from the ill-fated gamble that ruined his life.

Finally, Lafcadio must save Lucas himself. He first descends into the basement which contains vignettes displaying key moments from Lucas's past after the accident. Many unpleasant memories live here including his painful medical recovery, jail time, and visits to loved one's graves. As Lafcadio untangles what has happened he unlocks a final door in the basement, thereby revealing The King in Red, a broken old man hooked up to a breathing machine whose tears of blood power the device that generates the time loop in *The Sexy Brutale*. The King in Red has been imprisoned by The Gold Skull, master architect of the time loop, and forced to watch his loved ones die. The Bloody Girl, finally face to face with The King in Red, tearfully gives Lafcadio a ring and begs him to run. This ring unlocks a little house on the grounds of *The Sexy Brutale* which begins the final portion of the game.

This house appears to belong to Lucas and his pregnant wife Eleanor. She lives protected in this house, away from the cycle of murders in the casino. In real life Eleanor's pregnancy inspired Lucas to start anew, create a simpler life for his family. To do this, he believed he must burn down his casino for the insurance money. Her ironic death is one he cannot face, so he keeps her locked safely away in a little cottage that may or may not have even existed. She grants Lafcadio the ability to travel through mirrors, which require him to look at himself and confront who he truly is.

The final section of the game is a puzzle in which Lafcadio must save Lucas. One of Lucas's first lines while waiting for his bombs to go off is "There's time. Still plenty of time." This, of course, is false, as the bombs detonate early. This line about time also echoes other similar lines in the game. At the very beginning of the game Lafcadio is told he has "all the time in the world." Grinmaw similarly tells The Bloody Girl "Heh, there's time, girl. There's always time." Perhaps these statements are as false as Lucas's as he waits for the fire: his aging body provides the proof that his time is limited. The end of his life, much like the poisoned shot on the roulette wheel that kills Clay, descending spikes that kill Greyson, and bomb timers that seal the fates of everyone in the mansion, tick closer. Time he consumes within the time loop is time he loses in the real world. Perhaps this is why The Bloody Girl wants so much for him to move on, to take advantage the life he still has left.

Opposing her efforts, The Gold Skull says, "She would have you forgive yourself. She would let us go. She would have you live. But I am not ready. I will never be ready!" The word "ourselves" here is interesting. It suggests that The Bloody Girl, The Gold Skull, Lafcadio, and past Lucas are one in the same: parts of present Lucas. The Bloody Girl represents Lucas's desire to move on, The Gold Skull is his guilt and fear of forgetting those he loved, Lafcadio is the impartial judge of his actions, and past

Lucas is Lucas's memory of himself during the trauma of the fire. To him, forgetting his friends will mean they are truly gone. As he says to Lafcadio, "This is how I keep them alive. This party. This day. I keep that agony fresh. I see their faces. I REMEMBER them." The Bloody Girl tempers his argument with advice of her own: "you only have to forgive yourself just enough to live." She believes Lucas can move on without abandoning those he loved. Thus, Lafcadio is presented with a decision beautifully mirroring the game mechanics: "do you want to restart the day?" Every time the player uses the pocketwatch throughout the game they see the same prompt. It's a gameplay mechanic, a popup to ensure the player didn't press the stopwatch by accident. But this time, situated in context at the end of the game, it takes on new meaning. Should Lucas let go?

If Lucas restarts the day, the game continues as normal. If he collects an entire set of playing cards scattered throughout the mansion he can access a secret ending to the game, meeting the demon symbolizing "old habits," gambling. If Lucas succumbs to his old vices he can "walk away" and forget everything. The scene cuts to a party in the mansion; all of the guests are alive and happy. This scene goes on forever if Lafcadio chooses not to break the stained glass in the back of the room. Break it and the scene freezes, the illusion shattered. The game is over.

If Lucas chooses not to restart the day, a group of Lafcadios emerges with the goal of preventing all of the murders simultaneously. Each version of Lafcadio marches to a different part of the mansion to prevent the murders that happened there. This can be interpreted as Lucas's subconscious working through all the deaths and preparing to move on. Once he's saved them all, The Bloody Girl speaks:

"Goodbye, my love. Whatever I am, I am always here. Visit if you want. But don't stay too long. It's time to make new memories. Time to live the life you still have."

Then after a pause, "Time to move on, old man."

The scene cuts to Lucas standing in front of Eleanor's grave, head down. It's raining, an effect echoing The Red King's tears. After a moment of this, a piano note echoes through the scene: it's the sound that plays at the beginning of the day in the game. It's a new day for Lucas, for he has chosen to move on and let go. It's a glimmer of hope in this sad spectacle, for this time, he has not restarted the same day but started anew.

Strongest Element

The narrative and puzzles are beautifully interwoven, resulting in a unified, powerful gameplay experience. This cohesiveness suggests close collaboration between game and narrative designers, a practice that is less common than it should be in game development. This careful planning creates a narrative, setting, and game that's a single well-oiled machine. Key events in the game reverberate throughout the entire house through sounds, character reactions, and sometimes significant plot events. For example, when Tequila is murdered, a staff member drops her body down a garbage chute to be eaten by a giant spider, the same spider that kills Trinity. The spider only notices Trinity because she behaves erratically upon discovering Tequila, running into its web in a panic. As the player must solve Trinity's

murder before Tequila's, this serves multiple purposes, both complicating the machinations of the mansion and creating intrigue regarding what's happened to Tequila. This careful weaving of events gives the mansion a unique, well-defined character. Given that all the events in the day were dreamt up by a single damaged man, perhaps that personality is his own.

Unsuccessful Element

The game's final act is rather heavy on exposition. Though it was very successful in conveying narrative it was less successful in its pacing and structure. The player must follow The Gold Skull through nearly every significant room in the mansion, listening to him monologue in every room he enters. This may not be a problem for patient, readerly folks, but the pacing is a bit of a departure from the rest of the game. Perhaps the issue lies in this section's linearity; doors are blocked off, sparse puzzles are reduced to a single action, and the player is forced to follow a single character around the mansion for an extended period of time. It is at odds with the core gameplay of exploration and discovery; everything is fed to the player methodically, sequentially. Admittedly the developers had a difficult task here as the narrative is complex and nuanced, but the developers could have trimmed down the final denouement at least a little.

Highlight

"Do you want to restart the day?"

This line, something players see over and over again throughout the course of the game, is recontextualized in an instant during the game's final act. It's presented the same way as always: swathed in the same UI elements, affording the player the same options, yes or no. At the end of the game, however, when it becomes clear that this question is about Lucas letting go, the prompt gains new meaning and significance. It is rare that a game reuses a simple gameplay element to represent an emotional end-of-game decision. In fact its impact is *more* powerful when framed as an otherwise mundane screen prompt, for it's something the player realizes they have been doing over and over again without much reflection. It paints that same decision—the whole game, perhaps— in a new light. Moments like these are rare in games and deserve recognition.

Critical Reception

Overall *The Sexy Brutale* has been well received. IGN's Jonathon Dornbush describes it as "a time twisting puzzle box worth losing a few hours in," awarding it an 8.2/10. PC Gamer's Christopher Livingston gives it an 82/100, describing it as "a stylish and creative adventure with a clever time-rewinding hook." Eurogamer's Edwin Evans-Thirlwell deems it "recommended," describing it as "a tale of bloodshed that is as gripping as it is ghastly." Overall they describe an engaging, clever story taking place in a world they want to continue exploring even after the story is finished.

Lessons

- **Lesson 1:** Narrative puzzle games are strongest when the narrative and puzzles are intertwined. For example, the player must understand *why* Willow Blue has decided to hang herself before they can stop the event from occurring. The puzzles force the player to dig deeper into the story and characters, enhancing their significance all the more.
- **Lesson 2:** Redundancy can be key. If the player has to be in the right place at the right time to receive key information, developers may consider hiding that information in a few places. For example, in order to save Redd and Greyson, two switches on either side of the stage must be pulled simultaneously. If the player follows the hotel staff, they will say this directly. However, if the player misses this dialogue the switches themselves provide a clue. When *either switch* is pulled, both switches turn green for a few seconds, a visual cue indicating how to solve the puzzle. These little nudges can simplify the experience and make it more pleasurable. For narrative purposes a little redundancy also ensures players get the whole story.
- **Lesson 3:** If a player has to do something many times, make sure it doesn't get dull. This is done well overall in *The Sexy Brutale*; every time the player restarts the day, they can see new parts of the mansion and discover new dialogue. The mansion is diverse and interesting and holds surprises around every corner. One area in which this fails, however, is in the start of day animation: Lafcadio starts out laying down and takes a frustratingly long time to stand up. Given how many times players restart the game, they will want to hit the ground running come their tenth repetition and this animation can be a little disruptive. Overall the game does pretty well managing the repetition, however, and a majority of the time it is fun.

Summation

The Sexy Brutale takes full advantage of its primary mechanic: sleuthing. If the player must spend a lot of time engaging with this mechanic, then the characters should have interesting things to say and do. They do, and that's what makes the game so memorable. It is packed with narrative layers that players will unfold as they go deeper into the mansion—and consequently, the story. This game is a rare case in which the gameplay would be nothing without the story and the story considerably less enchanting without the gameplay.