

# GAME NARRATIVE REVIEW

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**Game Title:** Gunpoint  
**Platform:** Microsoft Windows, Linux, OS X  
**Genre:** Puzzle-Platform  
**Release Date:** 3 June 2013  
**Developer/Publisher:** Suspicious Developments  
**Writer/Designer:** Tom Francis

## OVERVIEW

Freelance spy Richard Conway is about to meet with a potential client, Selena Delgado, when she is murdered by an unknown killer. With the very real possibility that Conway will be accused of the crime and the real killer will get away, Delgado's employer helps him wipe the security footage, which shows him in the building just before the murder. Doing so ropes Conway into a conspiracy between powerful corporations and he must choose whose side he's on.

## CHARACTERS

- **Richard Conway** – the player character of *Gunpoint*, Conway is the not-so-classic hardboiled ~~detective~~ freelance spy. (He's more soft-boiled depending on the player's dialogue choices and actions.) Though he isn't having smokes in a dark room, he is driven to find an elusive killer while navigating a corporate conspiracy. Lucky for him, he's a competent spy with lots of fun toys to help him solve the mystery and hopefully punch the killer in the face. Er, bring the killer to justice.
- **Melanie Rooke** – the CEO of Rook Firearms and Selena Delgado's employer, Rooke wants the real killer caught. She helps Conway delete the security footage to cross him off the list of suspects, inadvertently endangering one of her other employees. She's the femme fatale of the cast and a major player in the corporate backstabbing that's been taking place.
- **Katie Collins** – an analyst for Rooke Firearms, she's arrested for the murder of her friend, Selena Delgado. Mark Jackson, Rooke's husband, is claiming that he saw her at the scene of the crime, making her the only suspect. Not knowing why a nice man like Jackson would frame her, she hires Conway to help prove her innocence. As the wrongfully accused, her life is in the hands of people far more powerful than she.

- **Julian Mayfield** – an anonymous client eventually revealed to be the Chief of Police, he contacts Conway to investigate Selena Delgado’s murder and prove Katie’s innocence. He’s a subversion of the corrupt/incompetent cop archetype, wanting to fix the corruption in town. Turns out that a lot of the corruption may be gross incompetence, though.
- **Mark Jackson** – since he’s Rooke’s husband and CEO of Lucena Logistics, Jackson is being blackmailed by Fritz Gessler. As this is basically a future noir plot with sass, Jackson is only innocent when it comes to the whole “Delgado’s dead” thing. After cheating on his wife and stealing her money, he just wants to get out of the city. Not a bad idea when the aforementioned wife has a medical degree and a gun company.
- **Fritz Gessler** – CEO of Intex and all around bad guy, Gessler is Rooke’s rival and the other major player in their corporate game of cat-and-mouse. Though he didn’t pull the trigger, Gessler is behind almost every death in the game. He also blackmails Jackson, forgets that suicide exists because he’s so used to faking them, and swears a lot. He’s a corrupt corporate executive through and through.

## BREAKDOWN

The game’s heavy use of film noir tropes and use of futuristic technologies places it squarely in the future noir subgenre. Much like film noir, future noir often features plots involving murder investigations, wrongfully accused men and women, double-crosses, and complicated schemes. *Gunpoint* features all the above, but Tom Francis creates a truly unique and engaging world through his writing, characters, and inspired mechanics.

Rather than the standard hard-drinking, chain-smoking private eye, *Gunpoint* gives us Richard Conway. Thanks to the dialogue trees, there are three ways to play him: straight and to-the-point, deadpan and snarky, or 99% nonsensical. While his personality may be a bit questionable, there is no doubting his skills since warring CEOs and the Chief of Police all use his services.

No matter which personality the player ascribes to Conway, he remains a talented investigator. If the number of clients he accrues over the course of the game isn’t enough proof, he is capable of infiltrating heavily guarded buildings and stealing information. The game also doesn’t punish the player for royally screwing up a puzzle solution, removing a lot of the frustration that can come with real-time puzzle mechanics and keeping the player immersed.

Much of Conway’s personality is portrayed through his dialogues with other characters. As the detective in this future noir story, the people he encounters are also archetypes associated with the genre. For example, Melanie Rooke is almost a deconstruction of the femme fatale trope. As Conway’s first official client in the game, she is the CEO of the company that initially monopolizes the firearms market in East Point. Rather than using her feminine wiles to get what she wants, Rooke employs cunning and corporate espionage, and has no romantic interest in Conway. She also doesn’t take it to heart when Conway starts working for the competition. While not really a villain, she is not above a heinous deed or two.

Once the security footage is wiped, Katie Collins is set to take the fall for Selena Delgado's murder. She's the Wrongly Accused Innocent Woman of the story and she hires someone to find evidence to clear her name. That person being Conway, the one who destroyed the evidence that would have kept her out of lockup in the first place. The dialogue options have more potential for kindness than with other characters. Katie is by far the sweetest character in the cast, emphasized by her trust in others, her apologetic nature, and the way she writes her messages. While the in-game explanation for her unique text style is her borrowing an unfamiliar phone from a sex worker (also a future noir staple), her dialogue patterns form the picture of a genuinely kind and caring woman. Her sentence structure is almost childish and energetic, which makes it easier for Conway to notice when something is wrong.

This story wouldn't be complete without involvement with the police (verbal communication, not just punching them in the face). Enter Julian Mayfield. Suspecting that Selena Delgado's case is being mishandled and that her arrested colleague is innocent, the Chief of Police himself decides to do something about it. While his influence on the ending is minimal, the investigations he has Conway conduct have divergent and moral implications. Since Conway is investigating himself, Conway can be as honest or manipulative as he wants. Depending on how the player conducts themselves, Mayfield might just find out who really wiped that security footage.

Mayfield is the exact opposite of a dirty cop. Instead, that honor goes to almost the entirety of East Point P.D. Well, they're more incompetent than anything. Most of the evidence he could have used against Conway was damaged or destroyed by Mayfield's own officers. This allows for an interesting take on police involvement in the plot. Mayfield is genuine in his efforts to improve the city, but his men are so grossly negligent that the dirty cops of a standard noir still get their time to shine.

Conway gets one direct mission with Mark Jackson, a corrupt CEO but also an innocent man. Well, innocent to an extent. Jackson's role in the story consists of cheating on his wife, stealing money from his wife, accusing a woman (who works for his wife) of murder, and getting blackmailed by a rival company (that's at odds with his wife's company). (Needless to say, Rooke isn't too torn up about throwing him under the bus in the end.) At the same time, Jackson is not Selena Delgado's killer.

The player basically has two options: clear his name at the cost of letting Selena Delgado's killer getting away, or frame him for the murder to give Conway time to go after Gessler and the killer. While this is indeed a moral quandary, Jackson honestly doesn't give Conway (or the player) to sympathize with. However, the most morally bankrupt character in the game is none other than Fritz Gessler.

As CEO of Intex, Gessler has no problem wielding his power for personal gain. He is the epitome of a corrupt corporate executive. This archetype is very popular in dystopian fiction, representing the darkest shade on that world's morality scale. His first response to hearing that his rival *might* be working on something new is to send someone to steal it. His mission options are the only ones to contain profanity. He even has his own towering building of evil and has an evil counterpart to Conway in his employ.

Hightower is an agent of Intex and he can do anything Conway can do, such as survive falls from great height, defenestrate the opposition, use the same gear, and own a nice hat. The player only gets to fight him if Conway sides with Rooke since he's Selena Delgado's real killer. However, by this point in the game, Conway has a gun and can opt to shoot him. This might not be the best idea though.

It's mentioned multiple times in the story that East Point has banned guns and using one starts a timer that calls a police sniper. If the player doesn't escape in time, the sniper will kill Conway without fail as soon as he exits the building. The revolver also has limited ammunition so again, the player is not incentivized to use it unless necessary. This is one of the least obvious but best implementations of gameplay and story.

## STRONGEST ELEMENT

The puzzle mechanics of the game are innovative, creative, and deceptively simple. Conway is a skilled hacker, but once he acquires the Crosslink he can go anywhere. The Crosslink allows him to rewire electrical systems. And since the game points out that most everything—including the police sidearms—are wired, there is no door or switch that is safe from him. There are often multiple solutions to a problem, which goes hand-in-hand with Conway's (occasionally unorthodox) mannerisms. It's a novel take on stealth, forcing the player to plan their route, be quick, and be clever like a real spy would be.

## UNSUCCESSFUL ELEMENT

The resolution of *Gunpoint* feels like there's an additional hour or so of gameplay missing. While the early-game keeps a consistent pace, the revelations happen so quickly that the game is over before it should be, especially if the puzzle segments are completed quickly and the player don't find all the emails. There's not enough time to let the story breathe and sink in and the last of Conway's arsenal is only available for the final mission. Players don't realize that they've played through the climax until the credits start rolling. The wrap-up to the story is Conway filling out his journal, which takes ten seconds before the player is sent to a separate web page to look at the full entry; they are literally taken out of the game as soon as Gessler is defeated. If the player wants more puzzles there is a level creator and creations can be shared, but the story is over. After spending time to get to know the characters, it's a little disappointing that the player doesn't get to see the full consequence of their actions.

## HIGHLIGHT

The cold open introduction is completely unexpected and exemplifies the more outlandish aspects of the game. A gray city looms in the background of a rainy night. The all the lights are on in a solitary building. Two seconds of aesthetic glory before SMASH—a man flies through a window, bounces off the wall of the building next door, falls three stories through a pane of glass, and hits the ground with a thud. It is silent save for the rain, the smashing glass, and the buzz of a cell phone. The player is given time to process what they just saw. The first five seconds not only show two (arguably three)

major game mechanics, it masterfully sets the offbeat tone and hints at a later plot point, all without a word from the characters.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

- Marty Sliva of IGN rated the game at 9.0/10 for its puzzle mechanics, atmosphere, and writing, his only point of contention being the its premature end. In terms of the games writing, he stats that it was consistently hilarious. Players can choose what kind of private eye they want to be with the dialogue options, from a Same Spade-type straight man or a hard-boiled Sterling Archer. He also praised the complementary art style that refrained from cluttering the environment and how it presented information.<sup>1</sup>
- Destructoid's Fraser Brown gave the game a 9.5/10—" A hallmark of excellence. There may be flaws, but they are negligible and won't cause massive damage." One of the flaws he mentioned is the keeping track of tall the involved parties in the fourth quarter of the game. The narrative is compelling considering that it consists of texts and stolen emails for the most part. Conway playing different sides and having to make moral choices was cited as a plus, keeping track of those four to five plot lines can potentially be confusing.<sup>2</sup>
- The game received a 7.5/10 from GameSpot editor Peter Brown. Most of his praise went to the mechanics of the game and its visuals; he detracted points for lack of content. The most enjoyable thing about the plot appears to be the various outcomes dependent on the dialogue trees with the interesting cast. Multiple trips through the game is enjoyable to a point and it's fun to see how the story deviate in different ways.<sup>3</sup>

## LESSONS

- **Player agency can convey a story as well as written words** – Video games are still trying to find the best way to tell stories, often taking what they know from other mediums to convey their intent. But while prerendered scenes and blocks of text can work for television or novels respectively, a video game should take advantage of the direct interaction it can provide its audience. If you want to convince your player that they're an intelligent, witty spy, let them solve intricate puzzles and banter with their clients.
- **Understanding player expectations can enhance narrative** – The game is consistently praised for its use of art, sound, and narrative to bring film noir elements to life. When choosing a setting, it is important to understand the player's expectations of the world they're interacting with. A developer who understands the tropes associated with their creation can more easily convey their narrative using the world itself. By understanding expectations, they can use, subvert, and defy them to create a unique story.

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<sup>1</sup> Sliva, Marty. (20 June 2013). Gunpoint Review. <http://www.ign.com/articles/2013/06/21/gunpoint-review>

<sup>2</sup> Brown, Frasier. (03 June 2013). Gunpoint Review. <https://www.destructoid.com/review-gunpoint-254833.phtml>

<sup>3</sup> Brown, Peter. (7 June 2013). Gunpoint Review. <https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/gunpoint-review/1900-6409472/>

- **A compelling plot and engaging mechanics can still result in ludonarrative dissonance.** – As an artistic medium, video games are unique in the immersion they can provide. However, this immersion can be broken when the elements of the world don't remain consistent. Finding the perfect balance can be extremely difficult because the way each player interacts with the game will be different; they'll bring their own biases. However, this doesn't necessarily have to be a bad thing. Tom Francis realized that the title didn't match what the game eventually became. He managed to humorously weave that inconsistency into the game with achievements and by breaking the fourth wall. If a developer can't necessarily remove the dissonance, it is still possible to make it work in their favor.

## SUMMATION

*Gunpoint's* witty narrative is a combination of clever writing, creative mechanics, a detailed pixelated art style, and fantastic soundtrack. The player can explore the world at their own leisure via dialogue trees, a wide variety of puzzle solutions, and hidden story elements. Because of this, the story becomes more memorable and woven with the player's impact on events in the game. While the gameplay doesn't always mesh perfectly with the story, the overall experience is so compelling that the narrative is still deeply engaging.