

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: The Shivah
Platform: Windows, Mac OS, Linux, iOS, Android
Genre: Adventure, Detective
Release Date: November 22nd 2013
Developer: Wadjet Eye Games
Publisher: Wadjet Eye Games
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Dave Gilbert

Overview

“The night sky above Manhattan will never win any awards. The few stars looked lonely and desperate. I could relate,” muses Russell Stone, as a plaintive, melancholy theme plays in the background to open *The Shivah*, a third person point-and-click adventure game where protagonist Stone doubles as both reflective rabbi and intrepid sleuth, as he tries to solve a murder while contemplating the answers to some of life’s hardest questions.

The game begins with Rabbi Stone on the verge of closing down B’nai Ben-Zion synagogue due to a lack of funds when recently murdered ex-member of his congregation, Jack Lauder, turns mysterious benefactor by bequeathing Stone \$10,000 in his will. Faced with the moral implications of accepting this ‘blood money’, Stone decides to pay a ‘shivah’ (the seven day mourning period in Judaism) visit to Lauder’s wife to justify accepting the money and make sense of this new windfall. This thrusts Stone into the role of detective as he attempts to figure out why he was left the money and to clear himself as a suspect by uncovering the truth behind Lauder’s murder.

Driven by this plot, *The Shivah* manages to stand out from most point-and-click adventures by fully embracing its Jewish theme (complete with a Yiddish dictionary, a social network for Jews, a Jewish joke library and even a rabbi-vs-rabbi fist fight), presenting players with questions of morality and offering players with the option of selecting between response types (aggressive, calm, etc.) rather than explicit dialog options. The response type particularly worth noting is the rabbinical response or responding to a question with a question instead of an answer. The motif of rabbinical responses is introduced to the player from literally the first screen of the game and goes

on to play a significant role throughout, impacting the player's relationships and rather frustratingly, dictating the violent fisticuffs that conclude the game.

The Shivah offers three different endings based on the player's actions in two key moments. Thematically, these endings aren't terribly different from each other, but therein lies one of the strengths of the game. There are no unwarranted happy endings to be had here nor precise answers to the difficult questions that are asked throughout the game. Crowbarring in a stereotypical joyful resolution out of nowhere would have weakened the gravity of the subject matter presented over the course of the game. Instead, while each outcome differs in terms of how optimal they are for the protagonist, they all leave the player with a sense that though some questions are ultimately unanswerable, we may still be able to find meaning, significance and fulfillment in life.

Characters

- **Russell Stone** – The protagonist and player-controlled character, Stone is the rabbi of B'nai Ben-Zion, a Manhattan synagogue on the verge of foreclosure. Stone is bitter, cynical and seemingly in the midst of an existential crisis as we often find him questioning his morals and faith, sometimes even in the midst of a sermon. He is forced into the role of a detective to clear his name when he becomes the prime suspect in the murder of a former member of his congregation.
- **Josh Kaplan** – Josh is the cantor (i.e. person in charge of leading the congregation in singing) at B'nai Ben-Zion synagogue. While his role is brief, the young, enthusiastic Josh serves as a foil to the disillusioned, embittered Stone, and one is led to suspect that perhaps Josh is an image of what Stone was like in the past – a youthful, vibrant member of the congregation before the many hardships of life turned him into a cynical rabbi in the present.
- **Sam Durkin** – The detective who first informs Stone (and the player) about the murder of Jack Lauder, Durkin also has a brief role but is important in setting the ball rolling for the murder plot driving the game. Though he doesn't directly accuse Stone of committing the crime, it is easy to glean from the nature of his conversation with Stone that the rabbi is the prime suspect.
- **Rajshree Lauder** – The wife of the murder victim, Rajshree is initially hostile towards Stone on account of the nature of her and her husband's exit from Stone's synagogue, but gradually warms to him as Stone becomes more apologetic and remorseful about past events. Rajshree serves to provide Stone (and hence the player) with information about her and her husband's business and the people involved in it. In the game's final act, Rajshree is kidnapped by the perpetrator and her fate ultimately rests on choices made by the player.
- **Amos Zelig** – Zelig is the rabbi of the large and prosperous Beth Tikvah synagogue. Standing in stark contrast to Stone, Zelig is revered and wealthy and does not seem to suffer from the internal struggles and conflicts that plague Stone. He looks old and frail, and speaks with a thick accent. All these differences seem

to foreshadow that Zelig will turn out to be the antagonist to our protagonist, and this is confirmed when Stone hacks into Zelig's email to reveal Zelig's complicity in the game's twin murders.

- **Joe DeMarco** – DeMarco is a mysterious, shady figure whose name keeps popping up during Stone's investigation of the murder. After finding out about the murder of Lauder's accountant in a nearby alley, Stone finally meets DeMarco in a dive bar. This is soon followed by a heated encounter between the two in an underground subway station, where Stone gains the upper hand and it is left to the player to decide DeMarco's fate, the result of which has a significant impact on the final outcome of the game.
- **Jack Lauder** – Lauder doesn't actually appear in *The Shivah* but his presence is inescapable as his murder acts as the catalyst for all the events that take place in the game. Lauder was a member of Stone's synagogue until he was unceremoniously banished by the rabbi due to the latter's objections about Jack's marriage to Rajshree. Lauder thus joined the congregation of Zelig who was more accepting of the marriage. However, this would lead Lauder to reach out to Zelig for help with the finances of his family business which would ultimately end up involving Lauder in the events that would lead to his murder.
- **Ethan Goldberg** – Goldberg, Jack Lauder's accountant, is the other murder victim in the game, killed by the same person that killed Lauder. Goldberg's involvement in the story is minor but the connection between the twin murders of Lauder and Goldberg as well as their involvement with Rabbi Zelig is what ultimately helps Stone in solving the case.

Breakdown

Through its somber introduction and Rabbi Stone's bleak opening monologue, *The Shivah* wastes no time in setting the scene for what the player will experience over the course of the game – a grim, but poignant exploration of morality, faith and the consequences of one's actions.

One can view the game's narrative as very loosely following the structure of the monomyth or Hero's Journey. However, this is no epic featuring grand expeditions and mythical battles between supremely powerful beings. Nor do we get to see a great transformation take place in the hero's nature. Instead, the hero in *The Shivah* is a simple, down on his luck rabbi who is called into action via an unexpected windfall of fortune and tragedy. The adventure he embarks on is not a voyage to distant lands but a personal journey where he attempts to atone for past sins. In the end, his reward is simply a better understanding of the world he inhabits and a renewed hope that, in the absence of ultimate truth, it may be enough to find fulfillment and meaning in life.

Act 1: A Call to Action

The Shivah begins with Rabbi Stone delivering a sermon to a near empty synagogue. Just before commencing, Stone wonders to himself why he was preaching at all, marking the

first time we see him explicitly questioning his own beliefs. The theme of the sermon is human suffering and Stone poses the question, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” This is significant in that this theme will be revisited in the game’s conclusion and help to illustrate the progress that Stone makes over the course of the game. In the opening act though, Stone does not have the heart to continue and jaded by such questions that he has seemingly asked himself often, stops preaching mid-sermon.

Soon after, Detective Sam Durkin shows up to inform Stone that Jack Lauder, a former member of Stone’s congregation, has been found murdered and has left Stone \$10,000 in his will. Durkin’s line of questioning and comments about the decrepit state of the synagogue clearly suggest that Stone is a suspect since he seems to have benefited greatly from Lauder’s death. However, Durkin makes no direct accusations and leaves. The young cantor, Josh Kaplan, overhears this conversation and is the first to mention the titular “shivah”, a seven day mourning period observed in the Jewish tradition after the loss of a loved one. Stone interestingly admonishes Kaplan since “shivahs are for Jewish families”. After this, in a monologue, Stone reveals how bleak his situation really was, as he states that he was about to lose the synagogue to foreclosure but can now afford to keep it open. However, he is morally torn about accepting the ‘blood money’, as he puts it. “They say God helps those who help themselves, and I had done absolutely nothing to get this money. I didn’t trust it,” Stone thinks to himself as he also wonders why Lauder would leave him this money, though their past ties are not yet detailed explicitly. At this point, Kaplan’s words strike a bell and Stone realizes that he can pay a “shivah call” to Lauder’s wife in order to better understand the situation.

The murder of Jack Lauder, him bequeathing a large sum of money to Stone, and the idea of paying a shivah visit, all combine to serve as the call to action. It takes this cynical rabbi from his present bleak situation and thrusts him into a murder case in which he is a suspect but from which he also stands to gain greatly.

In addition to the monologues of Stone and his dialogues with other characters, an important tool in advancing the narrative is the rabbi’s computer and more specifically the search engine feature. In this act, the player is tasked to figure out the password to Stone’s mail with the help of a ‘clue’ button and items in Stone’s inventory namely, his business card and a Yiddish dictionary. This helps introduce an important game mechanic that the player will use often throughout the game in order to uncover clues and make deductions to help solve the case. Stone’s mail paints the same picture painted by his somber words and the empty synagogue – letters from disappointed congregation members complaining about his bleak sermons and letters from banks and services complaining about overdrawn accounts and unpaid bills.

Act 2: Initiation

The second act sees Stone embark on his journey and can be considered as the ‘initiation’ phase in a typical Hero’s journey narrative structure. First, Stone pays the shivah call to Jack Lauder’s wife, Rajshree. Through their initial meeting, we can infer that Stone had cast out the Lauders from his synagogue eight years ago because of their inter-faith marriage. Here, the player is required to make prudent use of the game’s conversation

system and choose suitable response types in order to gain Rajshree's trust. Rajshree gradually relents as Stone informs her about the \$10,000 bestowal from Jack as well as convincing her that he wants to help and make amends for the past. Through Rajshree, Stone learns that she and Jack had a family fashion design business and that Jack was shot in the showroom of their company. In a poignant ending to this first meeting between the two, Rajshree asks Stone why he did what he did eight years ago. Stone responds by asking if they were happy. When Rajshree answers yes, Stone replies, "Then my reasons don't matter." This gives us a glimpse into Stone's internal struggles. His morals as a human tell him that love and happiness between two people is all that should matter yet his beliefs as a rabbi withhold him from allowing an inter-faith marriage to take place.

After this encounter, Stone, through some top-level sleuth work aided by the game's search engine and drag-and-drop mechanics, and through a second meeting with Rajshree, learns that Jack had an accountant named Ethan Goldberg, and that the two were involved in a suspicious deal with Joe DeMarco, an initial investor in the Lauder business. Interestingly, both Lauder and Goldberg were members of the Beth Tikvah synagogue and Goldberg had also been found murdered near a pub.

The real meat of this phase though is in Stone's encounters with Amos Zelig, rabbi of Beth Tikvah synagogue and with the aforementioned, mysterious Joe DeMarco. The first sighting of Beth Tikvah is significant in how it is contrasted with Stone's B'nai Ben-Zion synagogue. Beth Tikvah looks majestic with its stained glass windows and lecterns made of lacquered oak, clearly meant to suggest that the rabbi running the place is also doing well. Though Stone's meetings with Zelig don't reveal much, it does enable Stone to obtain Zelig's business card using which he is able to hack into Zelig's email. Here again the game demonstrates the distinction between Zelig and Stone. Zelig's mailbox is filled with letters from members of his congregation effusive in praise of his sermons along with letters indicative of his philanthropy which contrast greatly with the nature of letters we had seen in Stone's mail. However, mixed in with these letters, Stone also finds evidence that essentially enable him to solve the case, namely proof that Lauder and Goldberg had been setup by Zelig to do business with DeMarco and that Zelig had in fact instructed DeMarco to murder both Lauder and Goldberg.

To wrap things up, Stone is able to track down DeMarco and get him to admit that he had committed the murders on the orders of Zelig, who is revealed to have ties to the mafia. This encounter between Stone and DeMarco which takes place in an underground subway station provides the player with another opportunity to make wise use of dialog options in order to glean information from DeMarco while getting Stone to avoid being killed by him. Stone in fact gains the upper hand and the game presents arguably the most impactful choice that the player will have to make – spare DeMarco or have Stone kill him by pushing him onto the oncoming train. As is revealed in the final act, this has significant repercussions in the ultimate outcome of the game.

The final scene of this act sees Stone return to Rajshree's apartment only to find that she has been kidnapped by Zelig. This causes Stone to break down and deliver a lengthy

monologue as the weight of the actions he committed eight years ago weighs down upon him. He apologizes to Jack and most explicitly reveals his internal struggle of attempting to consolidate his morals as a man with the principles of his religion. This guilty conscience induces Stone to bring justice to Zelig and rescue Rajshree as the game is setup for a violent, thrilling denouement.

Act 3: Return

The final act is brief but tumultuous. Stone shows up at Zelig's apartment to find Rajshree bound, gagged and held at gunpoint by Zelig. Unbeknownst to the player, her fate has already been decided. If the player had chosen to let Stone kill DeMarco, then Zelig kills her and there is nothing that Stone can do to save her. If however DeMarco was spared, then he shows up and is killed by Zelig in Rajshree's place. Of course, during the game, particularly if the player opted to kill DeMarco during their first playthrough, the player has no idea that Rajshree's fate is determined thus and hence her death assumes an air of inevitability.

After either Rajshree or DeMarco is killed, Stone is eventually able to overpower Zelig through a final fight that is plagued by a flawed combat system which offers a very unsatisfying payoff to an otherwise great narrative experience.

The final choice the player has to make is whether to spare or kill Zelig which determines which of the three endings the player gets to see. Though these endings differ in terms of how beneficial they are for Stone (for e.g. he is taken into questioning as a primary suspect if Zelig is spared and Rajshree is killed), they don't lead to a significant transformation in our protagonist, as a typical Hero's journey-style narrative is wont to provide. Instead each ending paints only a slightly more hopeful picture than the last, revisiting the themes of human suffering and the fairness of God that were brought up in Stone's first sermon, only this time it seems like Stone has found the strength to complete the sermon, which seems to be the reward for the hero in this journey.

Strongest Element

Arguably, the strongest element of the narrative in *The Shivah* is the complex and layered characterization of its protagonist, Rabbi Russell Stone. Throughout the game, Stone's internal struggle centers around him being torn between his morals as a man and the teachings of his faith as a religious leader. Like many religious people in life, he seems to have often had to figure out how to do what he knows to be right as a human without compromising the values and ideologies of his religion. Nowhere is this internal struggle more apparent than after Rajshree's kidnapping when Stone is remorseful about throwing out Jack and Rajshree from his synagogue because of their inter-faith marriage. In a monologue, he concedes that "As a man I wished you all the happiness in the world. But as a rabbi, as a religious leader, out of duty I couldn't accept it." While here he seems to be apologizing on behalf of his religion, his religious convictions are stronger when confronting Zelig in the game's finale. Unlike Stone, Zelig is a man who seems to suffer from no such internal struggle, deftly balancing his rabbinical duties at Beth Tikvah on one hand and his criminal dealings with the mafia on the other. Stone's inner rabbi is

awakened when Zelig accuses him of not allowing concessions in his congregation. “As a rabbi, I do everything I can to help. And if that means refusing to conduct an inter-faith marriage, then so be it. I can still look at myself in the mirror and call myself a rabbi.” Stone explodes. The game does a great job in conveying this internal struggle throughout its narrative via these different monologues and dialogues. Additionally, the game begins and ends with Stone asking in sermon, “Why do bad things happen to good people?”, and questioning God’s fairness, representing another of his internal conflicts. As in life, the events of *The Shivah* fail to offer Stone with a satisfying answer to these questions but there is a subtle progression to be observed. When he first asks the question, Stone can’t bring himself to even complete the sermon, seemingly jaded by a question that he has wrestled with time and again. But at game’s end, he seems to have found the strength to power through.

Unsuccessful Element

The violent final confrontation between the Rabbis Stone and Zelig suffers from the combat mechanics of the fight being tied into the motif of rabbinical responses, without giving the player any intuition or prior knowledge of how these might work in concert. The motif of the rabbinical response is well established right from the very first scene in the game and serves several important purposes. It adds to the Jewish theme, is critical in many dialogue situations and even adds comedic elements to the game. However none of these helps the player in inferring the fact that getting Zelig to use a non-rabbinical response in the final fight leaves him vulnerable to being attacked by Stone. Additionally, this fight scene is the player’s final direct interaction with the game world and hence leaves the player with a sour taste in the mouth. The player is effectively robbed off the big payoff of Zelig getting his comeuppance at the hands of Stone by reducing it to a tiresome trial-and-error task or having to resort to online walkthroughs in order to figure out the key to the fight. At this point, the player has a great desire to give Zelig his just rewards. It is because of his actions that Stone is now wrongly labeled the prime suspect. Additionally, depending on prior choices, Stone also just saw Zelig murder Rajshree. Giving the player a variety of dialog options should help provide a greater sense of agency and control. However, combining such options with incompatible mechanics not only fails to deliver this sense of agency, but actually robs the player of any sense of it they might already have felt.

Highlight

The moment when Rabbi Zelig kills Rajshree, though not available in one of the three endings, stands out both in terms of its shock value and what it signifies in conjunction with the central themes of the game. This scene occurs if the player allows Rabbi Stone to kill Joe DeMarco in the subway station scene. However, if this is the first ending that the player encounters, there’s no way for the player to know that Rajshree could have been saved if DeMarco had been spared. Thus, the moment Rajshree is shot by Zelig, the natural instinct is to play the scene back and try an alternate sequence of dialog options. After multiple tries though, it becomes evident that all such roads lead to death for Rajshree. This seemingly unavoidable death gives weight to the notions of helplessness that Stone sometimes feels. No matter what we try, sometimes harsh conclusions are

impossible to avoid in reality. It also highlights the many questions that Stone often asks with regards to the nature of God's actions. Rajshree is completely innocent to the point that she wasn't even aware that her husband was conducting business with Zelig and DeMarco. And yet here she was shot to death for absolutely no fault of her own, again raising the questions that Stone asks in the game's first sermon.

Critical Reception

The Shivah has received generally positive reviews. Chris Dahlen of The A.V. Club [1] praised the game for its content, specifically stating that it “fits a compelling moral conscience over a tight decision tree, and compared to sillier interactive fiction ... its rewards are subtler, and more satisfying.” Dahlen also spoke favorably of how the game “deftly weaves [Jewish] culture into the noir storyline” and the retro gameplay-style and animations which serve as comedic contrasts to the somber, melancholic story and theme. However, Dahlen was critical of the ending fight sequence for mostly the same reasons as mentioned in previous sections above.

Cassandra Khaw of Rock Paper Shotgun [2] however spoke highly of this sequence, referring to it as a “brilliant twist on Monkey Island’s Insult Sword-Fighting gimmick”, suggesting that familiarity with the classic adventure game *Secret of Monkey Island* might make the finale more palatable. Khaw also wrote highly about the game’s exploration of morality and culpability, stating that the best part about the game is how “it doesn’t provide Rabbi Stone with a stereotypical happy ending” and that he “doesn’t experience an immediate, Disney-tinted renewal of spirit.”

Andrew McCormack of Adventure Gamers [3] rated the game with 4 out of 5 stars and praised the game’s script, stating that “the writing throughout the game is excellent.” In addition, McCormack also highlighted the few moments of levity and urged gamers to “not be put off by the seriousness, as *The Shivah* is never dull and has its moments of light relief.”

Lessons

- **Intuitive mechanics for in-game tasks can help the player identify with the character and add to the narrative experience**
Game mechanics that are naturally concomitant to in-game tasks can help the player better inhabit and understand the character they are controlling. In this game, the developers succeed in just that with the mechanics of drag-and-drop clues and a search engine. *The Shivah* is essentially a murder mystery whodunit masquerading as a point-and-click adventure game. Though Russell Stone is a rabbi by trade, the player controls him primarily as a detective attempting to put together the pieces of this murder puzzle rather than a pastor delivering a sermon from the pulpit. A typical story-driven adventure game might more lazily opt to present the player with obvious dialog choices and conversations to nudge the story along, but by allowing players to find out information by actively typing in terms into a search engine and coming to conclusions by combining compatible

clues via a drag-and-drop mechanism, *The Shivah* succeeds in allowing the player to go through the same mental processes that Stone might have had to as a detective, thereby adding value to both the narrative and the player experience.

- **Don't forcefully combine narrative elements with in-game mechanics when there is no natural fit**

In a similar vein, attempting to force the game's narrative elements and theme upon in-game mechanics can significantly detract from player experience and negatively impact engagement. Combining the motif of the rabbinical response with the combat mechanics in *The Shivah*'s final act comes across as contrived and illogical and adds no value to the narrative.

- **A flawed finale can sour the player to an otherwise great experience**

Through Rabbi Stone, *The Shivah* takes the player on a deep, contemplative, intellectually stimulating and exhilarating journey only to have the player finish with an essentially trial-and-error stricken boss fight. While consistency throughout the course of a game is key, it is also important that the player's final interaction with the game world not be something that engenders a sense of frustration that causes the player to question how good the prior game experience truly was.

- **Depriving players of agency can be powerful when done right**

Though seemingly counter-intuitive, taking away the player's ability to impact the world can sometimes be very powerful if it helps underscore other elements of the game such as its theme, as is done in *The Shivah*. In the game ending where the player chooses to allow Rabbi Stone to kill JoeDeMarco, when Rajshree is shot by Rabbi Zelig, the player's natural instinct is to replay the previous sequences with alternate dialog responses but it becomes clear that there is no sequence of responses that can spare her life. This realization that the player can do nothing to prevent this tragedy is strong in that it helps drive home the helplessness that Rabbi Stone feels in that scene.

Summation

Through its explorations of morality and belief systems, its portrayal of the complex character of Rabbi Stone and the theme of Jewish faith, *The Shivah* offers players a compelling, narrative driven adventure game that eschews many adventure game tropes to deliver a truly unique experience.

[1] <https://games.avclub.com/the-shivah-1798211167>

[2] <https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2013/12/16/wot-i-think-the-shivah/>

[3] <https://adventuregamers.com/articles/view/17996>