Game Narrative Review

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Month/Year you submitted this review: November 2017

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Game Title: Zero Escape: Zero Time Dilemma
Platform: Nintendo 3DS, PlayStation Vita, Steam
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, wraps up the trilogy of escape the room thriller games. *Zero Time Dilemma* (ZTD) takes advantage of many of the series staples to its narrative, from the time travel shenanigans, to twists based on player assumption, but also adds onto it another layer of meta-textual framing to dive into the motive's and actions of the person playing the game.

Characters

Zero Time Dilemma follow the series motifs of 9 major characters, plus often an additional secret 10th character. Each of these character's fills a needed role within the plot, although for the sake of this discussion, not all are relevant. ZTD is unique in the franchise, with having its 9 characters partitioned off into 3 separate groups: C-Team, D-Team, and Q-Team. Within each of these teams the player (supposedly) controls the actions of the lead character in each group.

- **Carlos**- A Firefighter, and one of the new cast members. Carlos is positioned as the most "audience surrogate" like character in the game, being one of the 3 POV characters, and is the de facto leader of C-Team
- **Sean**- an amnesiac boy with a strange helmet on his head that he cannot remove. He is one of the 3 main POV's of the game, and acts as the leader of Q-Team. His real name is Sean, but for most of the story, the player is led to believe his name is Q.
  - **Eric** – an ice cream salesman with temper and trust issues. He often bullies Sean, and is a member of the Q-Team
  - **Q** – the secret 10th character. An old man, supposedly with locked-in syndrome. He is the actual leader of Q-Team, though he obviously cannot do anything.

- **Dianne**- a young nurse, and one of the game's 3 main POV's. She is the leader of D-Team
- **Zero the 2nd**- the antagonist of *Zero Time Dilemma*. Zero the 2nd has trapped our heroes in the "Decision Game". They wear a plague doctor like getup, and seems to be interested in how "unfair" life can be.
- **Gab** – a cute little old dog present in the facility. Everyone loves Gab.

Breakdown

Zero Escape: Zero Time Dilemma opens like any good mystery, with a hook of great intrigue. All the characters are trapped in cells, with no memory of how they got there. Before them is a person in a plague doctor's uniform, calling themselves Zero the 2nd. Zero monologues about how "life is unfair" before telling everyone their fate. They will participate in the "Decision Game". A game of moral choice and consequences, where people can only escape once 6 of them are dead. But, Zero is not as "unfair" as life, and gives everyone an option to all escape with their lives. Zero will flip a coin, and if one person, Carlos, can guess it correctly, everyone gets to live. Zero flips the coin, and the player's first choice comes up: guess the outcome of the coin flip. The player makes their choice, as Carlos calls out the answer and….

Carlos guesses correctly. Everyone is quickly freed, presented with the ending credits, and a lot of questions. The player gets shown the save screen, and how scene interactions work, with the heavy suggestion to replay the scene, and make another choice.

This is one of the most brilliant beginnings this game could hope to have. In five short minutes, the game has completely turns on its head why someone would play a game like this. After all, why do people play a game like this? The most common answer for motivation you'd get would be something along the lines of "wanting to see people perseveres against great trials". To see people survive, as it were. And in the first five minutes, that's what you get. A threat, a resolution. Everyone escapes. Everyone lives. The Player can stop playing.

But naturally, the player will not stop playing. Because everyone living is not why the player plays the game. The player will, in near certainty, load up the game, go back to that scene, and make the opposite choice, despite knowing full well the outcome. And *that*, is the brilliance of this set up. In this change of framing, Zero's coin flip is no longer unfair chance, but an act of consent. The player has consigned these character to their future gruesome fates. And, why would they do that?

To see what happens.

Of course, the opening coin flip is not random chance. The player will always guess right regardless of their pick, and will always see the credits before the opening. This was a deliberate choice on the part of the designer, and it works. It cleverly messes with the player's assumptions, to create a very memorable opening, pulling the player into this world. It also set the tone and the narrative groundwork, for the rest of the game.

The lead designer of the *Zero Escape* series, Kotaro Uchikoshi, has always been good at managing player assumptions, as well as using and misleading them to create the many engaging twists the franchise is known for. For *Zero Time Dilemma*, with the narrative moving away from a visual novel like structure, and more to a "modern adventure game" in the designer's own words, Kotaro adds the camera into his toolset for clever misdirection. He foreshadows the existence of the secret 10th player in the Decision Game, the old man named Q, not only by vague references in dialog, but also by the camera. Many camera angles are placed to have him deliberately out of frame, to hide his reveal. For example, there is at least one distinct scene that twists the expectation of the "shot-reverse-shot" technique. In it, Eric talks at Q, as a sort of rhetorical aside. The camera, however, cuts from Eric, to the dog Gab, then back at Eric, in "shot-reverse-shot" fashion. In this way, it intentionally misleads the player on who the aside was aimed at.

Similarly, the misdirection of "Sean as Q", is done exclusively with camera work. When Zero the 2nd is establishing the rules of the game, such as the teams with their leaders, the camera shows us information in tandem with the dialogue. When Zero says Carlos is the leader of C-Team, it shows Carlos, and when he says Dianne is the leader of D-Team, it shows Dianne. But, when Zero says Q will be the leader of Q team, the camera shows us Sean. No one ever refers to Sean by name till after the reveal, despite knowing his name, so the player will simply *assume* their name is Q, by the visual language used. Film language, used to misdirect and control player's thoughts about the narrative, to build up to a unique reveal.

Another clever use of camera tricks in the story is to imply perspective. Specifically, the perspective of the villain. There are precisely two points, in the story, where we see things from a first-person perspective. One at the reveal of Zero the 2nds real identity. Sean is asked to finger who Zero is, and he does by dramatically turning directly to the camera and pointing, calling out Zero's real name. The second, is in the one of the game's special "bad" endings, fittingly dubbed the "Perspective ending". In it, the player, controlling Sean, needs to decide who to kill. If the player enters Zero's real name, Sean turns to the camera, and apologizes before shooting Zero with an arrow. It is also notable, that unlike all other scenes where a character dies (and there are a lot of them), this scene ends abruptly as Zero dies. These two scenes, along with some minor info of sunglasses, that feed visuals from a bunch of secret cameras, imply that all camera shots are seen from Zero's point of view. Everything we see, we see because Zero sees it.

Now, one of the most noteworthy things about Zero the 2nd is his power. The game states that, despite the insanity of the plot, and time travel an in-universe thing, Zero cannot time travel. Rather, Zero the 2nd is described as having the special ability to "Mind Hack". A cheesy name for sure, but in this context, it is the ability to see other people's thoughts and memories from their perspective including time hops, and to, for a brief moment at least, control their actions. To make them take choices they wouldn't normally do, for example. Now, who else in the story fills the role of seeing everyone else's perspective, and thus the time-traveling shenanigans, while lacking in the ability to time travel themselves, and gets to decide other people's choices for them at critical moments?

The Player.

Zero the 2nd, the antagonist of the game, and reason for the plot's very existence, is the Player. *Zero Time Dilemma* exists because of the players, in more ways than one. The Plot exists, because the player kept playing, despite getting a good end in 5 minutes. And the game itself exists, because of fan demand. The *Zero Escape* series is not a popular, or finically lucrative, franchise in its home country of Japan. The franchise only continued with this installment, thanks to a decent Western fanbase. The plot exists, because of us. Because we wanted to see more of it.

And what are Zero's motives, at the end of the day? Why, oh why did he put all these people thru this murderous ordeal? Including a timeline where 2/3rds of the human population die out? Well, partially, he states it is to create a scenario to prevent another, even worse level human extinction event. And another part, was to help create himself (he was born over the course of the story, thanks to time shenanigans). But really, the ending heavily implies it was because he wanted to see what happened. Now, let's head back, back to the beginning. Why someone would play a game such as this? It can't be because the player wants everyone to live. They got that ending in the first 5 minutes. The player plays, because they want to know; they want to see what happens. Everyone living at the end is bonus to the adventure.

The entire ending is about this motive, and questioning of it. Thanks to time shenanigans, all the protagonists time hopped into the good ending of the coin flip with their memories intact. It is there that they meet Zero for the final time. They are all notably angry at him for having gone thru his death game, and do not find his motives at all endearing or justified, but Zero posits a question. In that point of time, he has done nothing provably wrong. No one is dead, and there is no evidence of their kidnapping to speak of. So, is he worth punishing? Everyone survived did they not? And, everyone is at least a little bit wiser from the experience, no? He asks the character, and by extension, the player, to genuinely think about his motivation. About the player's own motivation.

He hands Carlos a gun; Carlos, being the most "audience surrogate"-y of the characters and thus a stand-in for the player, and asks him to be the arbiter of his fate. Carlos will choose, whether or not to punish Zero. And Zero states explicitly that he will not use his abilities to force Carlos's choice. It will be Carlos's choice, alone. Carlos raises the gun as the last scene of the game.

And it's the one choice, you do not get to make.

Strongest Element

Zero Time Dilemma's biggest strength in narrative, is its use of framing. Thru simply narrative framing the game raises these intriguing points into the perspective of choices, and player motivation. All of this is sub-textual, building and supporting the textual plot. It informs the story, while not directly engaging in that plot. It is also done, making full use of its many mediums, from the text, to the gameplay, to its camera work. It doesn't

overtly rely on one of them, to the expense of the others. Because of this, the story can be engaged with on multiple levels. If the player just wants a thrilling adventure story, they can get that. If they want to examine deeper into it, they can too. By keeping these elements sub-textual and mostly in the framing, it enhances the experience by never ham fisting the player with the theme's, while also rewarding players who do look further, and makes them feel smarter for doing so.

Unsuccessful Element

Players with excellent recall of the previous games (or had at least played them extremely close to when they played ZTD) will notice a few minor plot holes between this game, and the previous 2. *Zero Time Dilemma* also has the baggage of wrapping up the unanswered plot threads of the 2nd game, *Virtue's Last Reward*. VLR very much billed itself as being a part 2 of a trilogy, while every game in the series is very much its own beast. It is when ZTD needs to play wrap up for the previous game's plot, does its own plot suffer. The part of Zero's motivation, causing a timeline with a 2/3rds human extinction, to be handwaved by the until then unknown possible event of a timeline with a 100% human extinction, is probably the weakest part.

Highlight

The entire opening set-up of the coin flip and resulting outcomes is probably the single best moment in the game. As an opening, it establishes the tone and the intrigue for the story beautifully. The near surreal act of seeing the ending credits before the opening one's is both hilarious, and very clear setup for the games tone. It establishes the importance of player choices, and exactly how branching timelines work within this story. As the cornerstone of the entire narrative, it's a very unique and memorable. Its importance is both immediately relevant to the scene itself, and only becomes more relevant towards the end of the game. Its unique nature,will naturally help the player remember it, which is good for the late game, where information from that scene become important again. And, as a player choice, the framing, and subsequent re-framing masterfully setups the examinations to be held into the players own motivations to play.

And that's a lot to say, over a flip of a coin.

Critical Reception

Destructoid – DJ Andriessen – 9.5
IGN – Michael Koczwara – 9.2
Game Informer – Javy Gwaltney – 8.75

All three review sites praised the narrative of the game, for its strong writing, memorable characters, and unique plotting structure. The game's 3D character animations were often the point where most criticism was drawn, often feeling outdated, or clunky. *Zero Time Dilemma* was overall received as good finale to this trilogy of Escape Room Thrillers.

Lessons

Zero Time Dilemma teaches us several important lessons about game narrative on a meta-level. Many of the best aspects of ZTD, and even its some of its failings, occur due to meta-level choices by the designer. Lessons such as:

- **Lesson 1:** *Know how you are framing your choices, and why*
  - What do the choices you ask the player to make, mean in the context of the story? Sometimes a coin flip isn't just a coin flip. What is the framing of the choices you ask the player to make? For choice's you force the player to make, what are you asking the player by forcing them to actively participate.
- **Lesson 2:** *Know what motivates your player*
  - Know why a player would play your game; what engages them in the story. Sometimes it is simple curiosity, and that is fine. If you know why a player is interested, you can better deliver, or subvert, their expectations.
- **Lesson 3:** *Control player assumptions and expectations*
  - Know what the player will and will not know at any point in the story. If your game has twists, how are you alluding to it? How are you leading the player to the revelation? A good twist relies on the player making assumptions on your narrative that you subvert. So be aware of what a player will assume about your game.
- **Lesson 4:** *Smartly use film language within a game (where applicable)*
  - A game does not need to be "cinematic" to have a good grounding of film language to help tell it story. Understanding even the simplest tenants such as "shot-reverse-shot" can greatly expand your toolbox as a narrative designer. This is especially if the player does not have direct control over the camera in your game.
- **Lesson 5:** *Mange plot points and tone between entries in a series*
  - When writing a work with the intention of leaving unanswered questions or plot threads for a planned sequel, have a strong understanding of those questions, threads, and theme's present, so that a follow-up works theme's or intent gel with the threads they have to pick up. Failing to do so will both muddy that work's themes, and retroactively, muddy the themes of the original work.

Summation

Zero Escape: Zero Time Dilemma is a game of twists, turns, death, and time travel, and on the surface, it's a solid plot. But beneath the surface, on a meta level, lies many unique narrative choices that both reinforce, and propel the game's story forward. With its eye on player motivation and actions, the player is made both the hero and villain of the story. *Zero Time Dilemma* has grasp on narrative framing, from both its writing, its use of film language, and its design of player choices, that is rare to see in modern games. It is also an interesting case for "greatest hits" style games, as the game overall plot feels like it is both its own thing, as well as in part, remixing many elements for the first two games, making it an excellent capstone for the trilogy. It's an adventure well worth taking. Just, be aware of why you're doing it.