

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: *Hotel Dusk: Room 215*

Platform: Nintendo DS

Genre: Mystery Visual Novel/Point-and-Click Adventure

Release Date: January 22, 2007

Developer: Cing

Publisher: Nintendo

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Taisuke Kanasaki (director), Rika Suzuki (designer)



The trailer for *Hotel Dusk: Room 215* can be found at the following link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6iVfUWVDLPk>.

Overview

In 1979, three years after putting a bullet in his double-crossing NYPD partner and getting kicked off the force, a man named Kyle Hyde checks in to a cheap motel in the American Southwest: Hotel Dusk. He is a door-to-door salesman for a company called Red Crown now, with a sideline as an investigator "finding things that don't always want to be found." While outwardly doing his job, Hyde's true motive is a dogged search for his ex-partner Brian Bradley, who he believes is still alive, and a desire to understand

why Bradley sold him and his colleagues out to art theft crime ring Nile. Almost every event in the story somehow leads back to Nile, the organization that Hyde and his partner were investigating when Bradley went rogue.

Hyde first arrives at the hotel on a job for Red Crown with the intention of locating missing items on an order sheet. However, he soon discovers there is more to this dive than meets the eye, starting with Room 215, which is rumored to have the power to grant wishes. The game takes place as Hyde explores the hole-in-the-wall Hotel Dusk over the course of one long night, inadvertently unraveling the mysteries behind it, and coming to understand the connections between the hotel and his own past. Every staff member and guest he encounters has a secret for Hyde to uncover. The first character he grills is Louie, a Manhattan street kid-turned-bellhop for the hotel, who Hyde used to bust for pickpocketing on the subway. This cross-examination offers Hyde his first big lead--that his former partner had run off with Nile's money and framed Louie for the crime. When Hyde finds out this crucial information from Louie, the two form an unlikely partnership to track Bradley down. The first clue on that trail is a man who stayed at the hotel six months prior under the name of "Kyle Hyde"--could it have been Bradley?

Characters

Every one of the thirteen characters in *Hotel Dusk* is indispensable to the story. My walkthrough focuses on five figures who lay the groundwork for the narrative:

- **Kyle Hyde** -- The player avatar; he is a brusque ex-cop with a wise-ass attitude and no talent for making friends. His current beat is working for Red Crown finding missing items, but his true desire line is to know what happened to Bradley. We get a lot of his characterization and development through internal monologue, as well as his interactions with staff and guests of the hotel. When I was the player, Hyde's lines and the evolution of his character led me to find the hero quite lovable in spite of his unfriendliness. While Hyde is at first content to keep to himself, he soon finds his old detective instincts kicking in, spurring him toward getting answers over one long night.
- **Brian Bradley** -- Kyle Hyde's opponent; his traitorous ex-partner and a ghost from Hyde's past who occupies the recesses of his mind. Bradley maintains a strong presence throughout the story despite never showing up in the scene directly. He is a case of a mistaken opponent; at the end of the game it comes out that everything he did was motivated by a desire to rescue his kidnapped sister from Nile, and ultimately, to get revenge for her murder. We also come to learn that Bradley is the Red Crown client who sent Hyde on his search through the hotel for missing items to lead him to the truth.
- **Louis "Louie" DeNonno** -- Hyde's ally and the bellhop to the hotel; Louie is an ex-con Hyde arrested a number of times for pickpocketing 3 years prior in New York. When it is revealed early on that he was mixed up in the case against Nile

that Hyde had been investigating, Louie takes on the part of Hyde's sidekick as he explores the hotel. He serves as the player's sounding board, and uses his role as an employee to acquire items the player needs like the key to room 217.

- **Mila Evans** -- A mysterious young woman who shows up at the hotel with no luggage or money, and does not speak a word. She arrives wearing a bracelet bearing her name, and Hyde recalls it as one his partner Bradley used to wear. In the second-to-last chapter, Mila starts speaking again and discloses that she had been in a coma for 10 years after witnessing her friend Jenny get abducted. It was during her coma that Bradley put the bracelet on her wrist in honor of his murdered sister with the same name.
- **Dunning Smith** -- The owner of Hotel Dusk and the first non-player character the player encounters. He has a gruff exterior masking a sentimental--and as it turns out--artistic, side. At the end of the game, it is revealed that Dunning has been posing as the fake 19th century painter Osterzone with the help of Mila's father Robert Evans, which resulted in his daughter Jenny's kidnapping.

Breakdown

This gritty yet cheeky noir "reads" like a detective novel from the 1940s, its protagonist Kyle Hyde taking on the role of hard-boiled detective not unlike Philip Marlowe or Sam Spade. In keeping with this theme, the player holds the DS sideways like a book to advance through the game and uses the stylus to walk Hyde through the hotel to explore.

Hotel Dusk is a mystery that unfolds over the course of ten chapters, each occupying one hour of in-game time. Every character is essential because of his or her backstory that ties into the greater narrative and drives the plot forward. Each hotel guest's secret is one more clue to solving the whole case. The cryptic "angel painting" referenced by many characters becomes a tantalizing MacGuffin; finding this painting at the end of the game sparks the great revelation and the key to the entire story: Dunning is none other than its painter, Osterzone.

In his book *The Anatomy of Story*, John Truby explicates his concept of the "designing principle" (25), or the internal logic, of a story. This term refers to the original strategy by which a story develops, that takes it beyond premise into its fundamental shape and organization. The designing principle of *Hotel Dusk* is everything because it is actually the *hotel* itself. The setting becomes an overarching metaphor for the entire story and structure of the piece. As Kyle Hyde traverses the halls of the hotel, he plunges deeper and deeper into the vast chambers of the mystery. Rooms stand in for the secrets of the individuals occupying them, and no stone can be left unturned.

The interaction between narrative and gameplay is central to this game. After locating objects around the hotel, the player must navigate a series of risky conversations, and saying the wrong thing can have disastrous consequences. Hyde uncovers characters'

secrets by gathering information and then confronting them with it in the form of an interrogation. If the player chooses the right statements and presents the correct items, the characters come clean. Being straight with people has a payoff; telling them the hard truths (what they don't want to hear but need to hear) is the catalyst to their character change. One useful gameplay mechanic and narrative device is a set of short questions after each chapter in the story to reaffirm details in the plot that the audience may have forgotten.

Strongest Element

Summer: "Oh...But I had deduced...I was so certain of it!"

Hyde: "Well, I'm certain that you're an idiot, and only one of us is right. And you couldn't deduce your way out of a wet sack. That's why your books sell like fried crap at a county fair."

To me, the dialog is unequivocally the strongest element in *Hotel Dusk*. It is punchy, witty, and it rings true with its realism. The conversations of the game convey exactly what each character is like and how the members of its cast might reasonably relate to one another. For example, Hyde and Louie's buddy-like relationship would be lackluster without the shining banter between the two characters. Perhaps most importantly of all, the game's dialog is the lens into Hyde's character, and also his character *change*. It conveys him to the player as a broken, loner traveling salesman with a chip on his shoulder at the beginning of the game. It also shows how he grows to become someone who many people in the hotel rely on when they are in a pinch, whether it's the maid asking him for help finding someone who went missing, or the little girl down the hall who needs rescuing from a locked room. As character change is rarely found in games, the presence of this human growth in *Hotel Dusk* is momentous.

Unsuccessful Element

It is difficult to find even a single unsuccessful element that pervades the entire piece, so I will discuss two minor isolated issues in *Hotel Dusk*. While the overarching narrative of the game is constantly laser-focused, at a few times as a player I got stuck in the smaller, mission-level narrative. In these instances, I lost track of specific mission objectives such as what I needed to find or who I needed to talk to. It may be that the game's level designer created the goals without sufficient communication with the game writer. Greater collaboration could be a way of addressing this problem, tying narrative together with gameplay.

Some might also argue that the game's sheer number of coincidences is unbelievable, but for me it was a worthwhile suspension of disbelief. Although it seems unlikely that so many people with linked stories would show up in one hotel on one particular night, this is part of the charm of the game and the coherence of the web of secrets that is so necessary to the success of the narrative. The only suggestion I could make would be to

constrain the story to one coastline or state to make it feel slightly more realistic in that regard.

Highlight

The most impactful moment in the story of *Hotel Dusk* came for me when the underlying secret of the narrative was exposed. However, it wasn't simply the reveal that made this scene so emotional, but how it was executed.

This act takes place in a small room below the wine cellar, the pulsing heart of the hotel, and not located on the map. Hyde knocks down bricks revealing a hidden door, leading into a clandestine art studio that physically embodies the secret of the hotel. Here the MacGuffin angel painting itself lies concealed under a thick layer of white paint. This location fits the designing principle of the game beautifully as it is the innermost site in the game. In this dank room the truth comes out about Dunning's ruse with Mila's father Evans to manufacture Osterzone and scam art patrons out of their money, ultimately leading to Nile's abduction of Dunning's daughter Jenny. The four essential characters at the hotel are present: Hyde, Dunning, Mila, and Louie. Each of these individuals has lost someone to Nile, and they are brought together here in joint loss.

Most significantly of all, it is in this scene that Hyde learns the motive for Bradley's betrayal. Bradley happened upon the truth behind Osterzone and got in deep with Nile, who took his baby sister. Sadly, Bradley was too late and she was murdered, and the player feels his pain wash over her as Dunning relates what Bradley told him the night he stayed at the hotel:

He's holdin' his sister's dead body, watchin' the steam rise, when he hears a voice. "Ya can't change anything. Ya sold out yer people, and ya can't take it back. Yer sister's dead, and ya don't have any family left. Ya got nothin' left. Come'n work for me. That's the only road open for a man like you." I tell ya, the sound of that voice... He's a wounded man, Mr. Hyde. So then yer pal finished his story and his drink, but he never raised his eyes. And I asked him what he done next. He kept lookin' at his glass, but I could tell he was seein' somethin' else. "I accepted his offer," he told me. "I knew it was the only way to avenge my sister. The only way t'make Evans pay."

The player has waited for this moment the entire game, and for me, it was like a punch to the gut. Hyde has caught up with the ghost of Bradley, and learned that the events of three years ago all had a deeper significance than he could have possibly imagined.

Critical Reception

Alex Navarro of GameSpot gives *Hotel Dusk* an 8.2, speaking to the unique flavor of this game. He states, "This is hardly a dumb detective potboiler. This is an engrossing piece of crime fiction that keeps its hooks in you the whole way through, and it's because of

this that the slow pace and focus on dialogue over puzzles aren't just forgivable--they're actually preferable." This reviewer celebrates the novel-like qualities of the game and acknowledges how these choices for gameplay are a fit for *Hotel Dusk* because they naturally arise from the story. Traversing dialogue itself becomes a kind of puzzle that only gets better as time goes on.

Charles Herold of *The New York Times* (no number rating provided) recognized *Hotel Dusk* for the artistry of its animated sequences and its use of the split-screen technique. However, in my opinion, Herold became preoccupied with elements of the gameplay that bothered him and failed to appreciate the gold of the story. He says, "the game itself is essentially a series of conversations...Dusk is more concerned with story than game play." The critic complains that there are only a small number of puzzles throughout the game, but I would consider the explorative point-and-click nature of the game simply a more open-ended form of puzzle.

Finally, Herold suggests that Kyle Hyde has no need to pry the secrets out of the hotel guests, but I would argue that game narrative analysis reveals how absolutely essential it is for the growth of Hyde and others that he do so. This deep probing into the psychology of characters is one of the crucial pieces comprising the beauty of the narrative and the sense of redemption the player achieves at the end of the game.

Lessons

- **Medium:** Consider how the affordances of the medium can shape the narrative experience. *Hotel Dusk* takes full advantage of the capabilities of its console, the Nintendo DS, and leverages them in new and interesting ways. In addition to holding it sideways like a book, the player solves certain puzzles by closing the DS and reopening it. The game's pulp fiction quality combined with the emotional expressivity of its rotoscoping results in a visual crime novel that pulls the story off of the page and immerses the player in its world just like the newspaper in A-ha's classic music video for "Take on Me."
- **Story world:** A story world can be rich with relevant detail that highlights key elements of character and theme, even in a game that is not fantasy or sci-fi. The run-down but charming *Hotel Dusk*, with its cheesy apple paintings on the walls and hokey room names, could not be a more perfect setting to bring out Hyde's snarky commentary, as well as his self-revelation.
- **Genre:** Don't be afraid to bring playfulness into a genre such as noir where it doesn't appear to belong. Some of the most meaningful moments in this game arise out of its sense of humor and sentiment, such as the surprising contrast of the surly Hyde sewing up a doll for a little girl staying in the hotel or escorting an elderly lady to the hotel restaurant.
- **Characterization:** It is possible, and even rewarding, to make unlikeable characters sympathetic by giving them vulnerability and dimensionality. Martin Summer and Jeff Angel are both examples of this lesson; if a game can make us

sympathize with a pretentious writer who stole the work of his friend and a spoiled rich kid who ran off with his father's dough, we will care about their character change as well, ultimately fueling the impact of the greater narrative.

Summation

In *Hotel Dusk*, narrative and gameplay work hand-in-hand to deliver a wholly satisfying experience for the player. There is no need for high-definition graphics or flashy animation when a story is so seamlessly integrated into a game. The gameplay, full of rich dialog and exploration, centers around the story and stems organically from it. At the same time, however, the game is not simply a way to advance the story--it is itself a lively, engaging problem-solving challenge. The immense emotional power and resonance of *Hotel Dusk*'s narrative can only be accomplished through its tight coordination of genre, character, dialogue, and plot structure. The story weaves its way through gameplay as if walking the passages of the hotel. The player travels down the same path as Hyde, as though she were standing right beside him through the game. At the end of this road is what both seek most: Bradley.

Works Cited

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