

# Game Narrative Review

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**Game Title:** Twelve Minutes  
**Platform:** PC (Steam, Xbox), Xbox One, Xbox Series X|S, PS4, PS5, Switch  
**Genre:** Action-adventure  
**Release Date:** PC & Xbox – 8/19/2021, Playstation & Switch – 12/7/2021  
**Developer:** Luis Antonio  
**Publisher:** Annapurna Interactive  
**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** Luis Antonio

## Overview

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*Twelve Minutes* is the unravelling story of the Husband, our player-protagonist, who is trapped in his apartment in a twelve-minute time loop thriller. The Husband arrives home from work and is greeted by his spouse, the Wife, who announces her pregnancy. Their celebrations are interrupted by the Cop, a man who claims to be the police. The Cop restrains the couple before interrogating the Wife. He claims she murdered her father and demands the pocket watch she stole from him. The Cop strangles the Husband to death who awakes with a gasp at the beginning of the night.

This is the initial loop that sets our tale on a meandering path to the truth as the player seeks new information with each rewind. As the player collects tidbits of the story, new narrative trees begin to open as the player is inspired to interact with the characters and the environment in different ways. Each new angle reveals an interaction that exposes poignant psychological commentary.

## Characters

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- **Husband** – The Husband is the protagonist and player character. His name and background are unknown and unimportant initially as the player embarks on deciphering the murderous past of his wife. His personality in each loop is determined by the choices of the player. We only observe him as a separate entity at the start of each loop as he wails in despair, reeling from the results of each sequence, unable to escape the tragic loop. We only begin to examine the Husband once his identity is revealed in the penultimate plot twist: he is the son of his wife's nanny with whom the Father had an affair. Therefore, he is the half-brother of his wife and the 'monster' who murdered the Father. In coping with these truths, and trying to escape the loop, a final plot twist reveals that the entire story has taken place inside the Husband's mind, as he has been hypnotized by the Father.
- **Wife** – The spouse of the Husband and the daughter of the Father, the Wife seems content, secure, and loving. She is in the bathroom when the Husband enters the apartment. She reveals her pregnancy to the Husband shortly before the intrusion by the Cop. Through her interrogations, we learn that she tried and believes that she killed the Father seven years before meeting the Husband. She lied about her father's death and only reveals her past to the Husband once he confronts her with information gleaned from interactions with the Cop.
- **Cop/Father** – The Cop is a man who pretends to be the police to enter the apartment and detain the couple. The understanding of the Cop varies as we travel down the story branches. His first motivation is to enact revenge upon the Wife for murdering his dear friend, the Father. The motivation shifts to trying to retrieve the Father's stolen pocket watch so that he can pay for his daughter's cancer treatment. He is intense, violent, and unyielding, even when the Husband manages to restrain him. He is oddly honorable at times and does not take advantage of the Husband's naivete when he gives power back to the Cop. It is later revealed that the Cop is the Husband's manifestation of the Father inside the spiritual time loop of the apartment. The Cop is the Father, and the Father has hypnotized the Husband in an attempt to dissuade their relationship.
- **Bumblebee** – The daughter of the Cop who has cancer and needs money for treatment.

## Breakdown

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*Twelve Minutes* is a time loop game with a branching storyline, and as such, players can encounter information or sequences in various orders. For the purposes of this breakdown, the examined loops and endings will be organized in a common, linear order. When viewed as a whole, instead of countless loops reaching different completed endings, the narrative design of the game begins to resemble a three-act, eight-sequence structure.

The first act sets the scene by introducing the main characters (Husband, Wife, and Cop) in their setting (a three-room apartment) in the preliminary conflict that is the history of the Wife and its relation to the Cop. The catalyst for this exposition is not only the content of their interaction, but rather the introduction of the primary game mechanic of the Husband restarting the night upon incapacitation or exiting the apartment. This mechanic is a narrative tool that allows the player to explore the story in their own way.

The player enters act two in their new, repeating reality. The story is uninterested in the Husband, it is focused on the mystery of the Wife and the Cop. Each loop dives the player a bit deeper into each character's motivations and past. The Wife confesses her vindictive nature in prodding and emotionally manipulating the Father to the point of violence. This triggers the midpoint of the act. The player finds the Wife innocent and must interact with the Cop with this new information. The Cop softens as the player enlists the sympathy of the dying Bumblebee. These dilemmas indirectly asks the player, how much do we really know others, even the ones closest to us, and how much are we willing to doubt about them. Our entire society and its norms are built on a system of trust. This idea is pressured again when the player is asked to trust the Cop and remove his restraints. The Husband must take the word of a vengeful, powerful, and determined stranger while losing the foundation that is his spouse. In doing so, the Husband gains control of each loop. With this control, he unravels the truth. The act ends a shocking climax as we learn the Husband is the murderer and half-brother of the Wife.

Act three points our tale squarely at the Husband. The stunning revelation of self-identity triggers a sequence of self-examination. To this point, the Husband has examined others (or tried to escape others). With his identity and the weight that it carries, the Husband has a breakthrough in a final twist—he awakes from the hypnotism. The apartment was all in his head. This revelation forces us to examine the metaphor of every interaction. Both children are accused of murdering their father: this represents the pain the Father feels in both witnessing their taboo relationship and his mission in separating them. We must consider that story pathways are being manipulated by the Father who is the hypnotist. At this point, the resolution takes a turn and offers different versions of past and future in a nonlinear structure. The Husband can chose a future with or without the Wife, or a present where he struggles with the Father and actually kills him.

## Strongest Element

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The strongest element is the game's ability to expose multiple facets of each character through the exploration of wildly different scenarios with each of them. This allows the player to inspect character personalities while gathering information for the next branch of the story. For example, one interaction might see the Husband torturing the Cop and discovering his motivation- providing for his sick daughter. We see the player in a violent role and the Cop in a powerless state. The next interaction could be one where the Husband appeals to the Cop's morality and we experience a scene where they are collaborating as equals.

## Unsuccessful Element

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While the hypnosis twist unlocks deep metaphorical examinations and offers a rational explanation of the time loop mechanic, it detracts from the weight and impact of the player experience. It erases the player's guilt from certain choices like shooting the Cop or hiding in the closet to let the Wife die. The player can feel cheated for daring to invest emotionally in the game, only to have those choices washed away.

## Highlight

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The signature moment is the moment the player can conclude the identity of the Husband and his relation to the other characters. This is successful because the player feels the shock of the realization before characters in the game openly define it.

## Critical Reception

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**IGN: 8/10** – The author, Ryan McCaffrey, finds the gameplay traditional yet excellent in delivering an enthralling, mind-bending, time loop mystery. Without giving up spoilers, McCaffrey directly credits the narrative elements for delivering a captivating experience: “What I can say is that the payoff is worth it, and the clever way in which writer-director Luis Antonio Flips the traditional point-and-click adventure on its head makes for a compelling bit of unconventional storytelling that could only have worked as a game.” [1]

**The Guardian: 4/5** – Author Keith Stuart dives into his review by citing “the psychological thrillers of Hancock, Kubrick and Verhoeven” as clear inspiration. He compliments the narrative width in that “bad ideas tend to provide vital snippets of background information,” and how the game challenges your “allegiances and theories.” [2] Overall, he highly rates the story and defines it as a “dense Freudian nightmare.” [2]

## Lessons

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- **Complex stories can be told in compact spaces and timelines if you give the player narrative freedom with deep interaction trees.** For example, the player can explore various emotional states of the Wife depending on subtle item use or placement.

## Summation

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*Twelve Minutes* is a microcosm of psychological exploration. It challenges us to consider the effects that fears can have on a person's psyche and how they manifest in personality and choice. The metaphors delivered by Antonio's narrative elements are powerful and can affect players in different ways.

## References

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- [1] McCaffrey, R., 2022. *Twelve Minutes Review - IGN*. [online] IGN. Available at: <<https://www.ign.com/articles/twelve-minutes-review>> [Accessed 21 January 2022].
- [2] Stuart, K., 2022. *Twelve Minutes review – a tense time-loop thriller*. [online] the Guardian. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/games/2021/aug/18/twelve-minutes-review>> [Accessed 21 January 2022].