Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Until Dawn
Platform: PS 4
Genre: Interactive Drama Horror
Release Date: August 25, 2015
Developer: Supermassive Games
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Larry Fessenden and Graham Reznick, Will Byles, Tom Heaton

Overview

Everyone thinks they would make better choices and survive a teen horror movie until they get the chance to test it. *Until Dawn* is an interactive game that utilizes the tropes, cliches, and characterizations of classic teen horror dramas from mainstream media. The only difference is, as the player, you are actively at the wheel of all the choices the characters make which will determine whether they all survive until they're rescued at dawn.

You follow a group of eight teenagers who come together at a winter ski lodge on the anniversary of the disappearance of two of their friends, Hannah and Beth Washington. They have yet to be found since the previous year after the group pulled an humiliating prank on Hannah who ran out into the cold with Beth following after her. Now, Josh Washington, their brother, has invited the group back, planning horror themed payback for the circumstances behind his sisters' disappearance. However, more is at play this time around as things quickly take a turn from the tense to the terrifying as the group separately encounters Wendigos; monsters that are created when people resort to cannibalism, an abandoned mine and sanatorium with secrets and death traps, and the paranoia and torment from each other as they try to survive and even figure out what happened to Hannah and Beth.

The game utilizes high school teen stereotypes and tropes for its initial base characterization of the characters that many can identify on the spot. There's the hero, the loner, the nice girl, the class clown, the popular guy, the dumb jock, the flirt, and the mean girl. Though these are staples of the genre, these characteristics, when applied, don't leave room for diversity or inclusion in the game. *Until Dawn,* in many ways, sticks

too close to the pitfalls of horror when it comes to tropes, stereotypes, and lack of diversity, which is unfortunate when the game makes a point to subvert aspects of horror to enrich the gameplay experience.

Characters

In *Until Dawn*, the game is separated into ten chapters that will feature two or more characters, one of which, the player gets the opportunity to assume control over and their actions will determine the progress of each team. By the end, the player will have played as each of the eight characters.

- **Sam Giddings** is the de facto hero of the story. She's a white girl with blonde hair and the game self describes her as adventurous, diligent, and considerate and it shows in her interactions. This is what makes her a sympathetic character to the audience. She cares about animals and the well-being of her friends, especially Josh. She stands against cruelty, and this can be shown when she voiced her opposition to the prank pulled on her best friend Hannah in the prologue. She disdains from conflict but won't back down from a fight as evidenced when her and Mike team up against the Wendigos. She can be likened to the main character of a horror movie whose POV the audience would see the most from.

- **Josh Washington** can be described as the loner of the group. He has tan skin and short dark hair. He's described in the game as thoughtful, loving, and complex. Brother to Hannah and Beth, he's a central protagonist to the main story as well as an antagonist in another aspect of the story that the other characters aren't privy to. Since the disappearance of his sisters, he's distant from the rest of the group. None of the other characters, except Sam or Chris seem to care about his well-being. The player gets a look into his psychosis when they interact with Dr. Hill, Josh's therapist, or rather, the hallucination that resembles his therapist and see how the event has changed him. Due to his complex character, he's presented as a tragic figure as no matter the choices, he always meets an untimely end in death via a Wendigo attack or resorting to cannibalism and turning into a Wendigo.

- **Ashley Brown** is the "nice girl" of the group. She's a white girl and the game describes her as academic, inquisitive, and forthright. Though the player is given opportunities to challenge her forthrightness by having them choose to keep important information to herself. She's not the perpetrator of drama but she doesn't dissuade any either. She's easily the most spooked out of the team when she, Josh, and Chris use a Ouija board to contact Josh's sisters. She doesn't have much to do in the game on her own, though she is often paired with Chris and Josh. She doesn't change much by the end.

- **Chris Hartley** is the "class clown" character. He often makes jokes and quips, along with Josh, his best friend. He's a fair skinned white man with blonde hair and black rimmed glasses. In the game, he's described as curious, funny, and charitable. He also has a nerdy personality and is not a believer of the

supernatural. He also has a crush on Ashley and cares about her and this relationship gets contested as it stands in opposition to his loyalty to Josh.

- **Mike Munroe** is the popular guy of the group. He's a fair skinned white man. He's handsome and charismatic but has a narcissistic streak. In the game he's described as intelligent, driven, and persuasive. Mike is characterized as a ladies' man. In the prologue, he dates Emily and is the object of Hannah's affection and is used to bait Hannah into a vulnerable position during the prank. He then is seen with Jessica a year later. Mike goes through the most change from the beginning of the game to the end. He takes on a more leader figure to make sure his friends stay alive by entering the sanatorium to save Jess and risks himself to make sure the others live.

- **Matt Taylor** is considered the "dumb jock" of the group. He is an African American boy with dark skin and short cropped black hair and wears a letterman jacket. In the game he's described as motivated, ambitious, and active. He's a bit of a people pleaser. You can see that in his relationship with Emily, his current girlfriend. He takes her verbal abuse and mean attitude and strives to make her happy, even if the sentiment isn't mutual. While he is the only Black character in the game, and his character doesn't lean too heavily on stereotypes, he doesn't gain as much development as his white counterparts. The choices for his characterization is often tied to Mike because of his relation to Emily. He does have a role to play when he and Emily find the radio tower and try to call for help.

- **Jessica Riley** can be considered the flirty girl of the group. She's a fair skinned white girl and in the game, she's described as confident, trusting, and irreverent. She's very playful, especially around Mike. She's not afraid to get mean and stick up for herself, as she often fights with Emily, her former best friend. Depending on the choices made by the player, she reveals that despite her flirty and seductive personality, she has some deep insecurities and self-worth issues, which is an interesting subversion of the trope. Despite this, the player does not spend much time playing as her if she survives the initial Wendigo attack, so her development doesn't have the chance to go further.

- **Emily Davis** is considered the "bitchy girl" character of the group. She's an Asian American girl. The game describes her as intelligent, resourceful, and persuasive. She's known for being fierce, always ready with a scathing remark to anyone who criticizes her. Her pride can be much to handle as she treats Matt poorly, using him as a rebound for Mike, and she never admits fault for anything. Like Matt, her development is tied to her white counterparts at times. She becomes more resourceful as the game progresses, but her attitude doesn't change much.

- **The Wendigos** are the main antagonist. They originate from native American legend. A human who resorts to cannibalism becomes possessed by the Wendigo spirit, transforming them into monsters and eating the flesh of other humans they find. They are only able to see movement, and, in the game, Hannah becomes one

after she and Beth fall into the mine in the prologue. Beth dies on impact and Hannah resorts to eating at Beth's corpse to survive.

Breakdown

Until Dawn is an interesting look at how the horror movie genre can be implemented into an interactive game. The story is simple on the onset; a group of young adults come to a secluded place with a dark history, there's no parental supervision, there's drama amongst the group, and they are being tormented and haunted by supernatural forces as they try to survive the night. The game succeeds in creating a fascinating interactive narrative by utilizing some tropes for world building. The game uses the physical isolation, the abandoned institution, unforeseen weather, and lack of communication to the outside that is common in horror media as ways to build the environment and immerse the character. The scene may be familiar to the viewer, but it still provides that haunting feeling by giving the player agency to be at the forefront of jump scares. This is also done through the "don't move" feature of the game where the player must hold the controller completely still to complete an activity, whether it's feeding a squirrel or hiding from a Wendigo. The feature forces the player to put in as much focus as they would if they were in that scenario, which can lead them to be put off guard at any point and that builds valuable player immersion.

This also adds to the experience of being able to identify and empathize with the character if they are so inclined. For example, Emily is considered a very detestable character to play as because of her attitude towards the others, especially Matt. Many don't empathize with her characterization and, therefore, might play to make sure she dies at every choice. On the other hand, Sam and Mike are likeable characters because of their bravery and, as the player, it feels like they impact the story more than the others when they play as them. Players who are more invested in their survival will find themselves being emotionally toyed and tormented with as they agonize over what choice could lead to their safety.

The game also visualizes the internal and external conflicts that many horror movies employ in their stories. The horror genre has the benefit of utilizing the external conflict of dealing with supernatural elements while also using them to represent internal conflict that the characters are dealing with outside of the horror circumstances. A character might battle with ghosts as an external way of dealing with the depression of losing a loved one. The characters in *Until Dawn* physically encounter danger in the form of Wendigos who happen to be loved ones who met their demise at their hands. Each of the characters have their own values and traits contested throughout the game. For example, Chris is loyal, funny, and is not a believer in superstition, however through the course of the game, his faith in Josh wavers when Josh pulls a dangerous prank on him and Ashley, and his belief in the occult is tested when faced with the threat of the Wendigo. Ashely is forthright, but she comes across instances where it means life or death to her or the other characters if she, or really the player, keeps information to herself.

Looking deeper into the psychological/internal aspect of the story, the player endures Josh's psychological decline in an interactive way. Interspersed in the narrative, the player interacts with Dr. Hill, Josh's psychiatrist who asks them about their fears and their feelings on the characters. Dr. Hill will ask the player if they are afraid of clowns or spiders and such and the answers may influence the story. It's not clear from the onset if these meetings are real or fantasy which adds to the haunting element of the environment. As Josh's mental state deteriorates with the choices you make, so does the character of Dr. Hill and the space he occupies. The setting becomes darker, the room is more torn, the hallucination of Dr. Hill is more hostile, reflecting Josh's own thoughts since he never speaks in these scenes. There's a fear of the mind aspect that works well for interactive gameplay when the player can actively participate.

Many find horror characters annoying for the dumb choices they make that lead to their demise, so how does *Until Dawn* give the player the illusion of choice without sacrificing melodrama and unpredictability? The game's totems system works to remedy this to some degree. Butterfly totems show the player glimpses into the future. The player can then use these glimpses to influence their decisions. While they predict your path there's still mystery surrounding what decisions will lead to that scene and players can end up in interesting scenarios where, to avoid an outcome, they might accidentally play right into it, like a character in horror movie the audience is yelling at for making an obvious mistake.

The main interest lies within the characters the player gets to interact with. Each character exemplifies a horror movie cliché/stereotype and as they are introduced, the player gets a clear view of where each character lies and their relationship to each other. This provides a good basis to start their journey on, as the game intends to develop and change their archetypes to be more interesting. The game does this to varying success. For example, despite the number of characters in *Until Dawn*, the game is seriously lacking in diversity in the characters themselves. There are only two notable people of color in the game and their characterizations barely change or develop like their white counterparts. Emily is an Asian American woman who is characterized by her mean attitude that never really changes, and her intelligence, as she mentions she has a 4.0 GPA and is on honor roll, which is a common Asian stereotype. Meanwhile, Matt is the only other black character in the game and is considered the "dumb jock stereotype." His major themes as a character is being Emily's rebound boyfriend and a pushover at that. The range of characters should also allow for more nuanced and complex relationships between them, however a lot of them never have any meaningful moments with each other. Character interaction builds player empathy, and it seems the game only wants to keep up the shallow drama aspect to keep in line with the genre it's in. It's the thing that distinguishes a game from a movie. Watching a movie, the viewer's experience is at the mercy of the writer and their feelings on the characters hold no weight to how the story ends. In a game, the player has the illusion of control of the character's lives; if they don't care about them, that influences their gameplay.

Strongest Element

One thing about horror movies that contributes to the enjoyment that isn't just the horror, the characters, or the effects is the joy of watching with friends. This game works great as a group activity to play with friends as each player could hand off the controller to others and give them a chance to play the character in the story. One person can play as Mike, another as Sam and so on. The remaining members of the group can watch along, influence the player at the controller, and react to the horror and jump scares like they would if they were watching a movie. The game is also easily able to be replayed without being stale, as the player can try as many times as possible to see how many characters they can save, what decision leads to the many ways they can die, and it gives the player a chance to better explore their environment and the story.

For example, there are many opportunities and choices that can lead to Emily's death. In the segment following Matt and Emily in the fire tower, the player could choose to give a flare gun that Emily finds to Matt who will immediately use it, rendering it useless and alerting the wendigos to them. Another option is Emily could keep the flare gun and either choose to stow it or shoot ending in the same results. She has a better chance of survival by doing this. When being chased by the Wendigo, the player could fail quick time events leading to Emily's death. If she manages to escape to the conveyor belt in the mines, the player can choose to stay or leap off. Choosing to stay and failing the QTEs, she will fall into a grinding mill and die. Another example is that replaying the game, the player will notice that Chris's deaths all involve decapitation in some way. If you sour your relationship with Ashley, it increases your chance of dying. She will no longer trust you, which opens him up to being decapitated by the Wendigo.

Unsuccessful Element

Some of the female characters are still uncomfortably stuck in their stereotypical archetypes in a way that can mess with player empathy and immersion. Until Dawn noticeably fails the Bechdel Test. The female characters rarely talk to each other, and when they do, the conversation is about the men in the group. Emily and Jessica, who were seen as friends in the prologue, are introduced in the present timeline as hostile to each other over their relationship status to Mike. When they meet up again, they immediately argue over how "Jessica stole Mike from Emily". They never have a conversation with each other again that doesn't involve Mike. In fact, you as the player view this scene from only Matt's perspective and the only choice you have to diffuse the situation is by picking sides, essentially still pitting the one against the other. Jess also never gets the chance to show off a different side of herself in the player's POV as most of her character is used for the "damsel in destress" cliché when she gets captured by the Wendigo and Mike must rescue her. Sam is often either grouped with another man or on her own and doesn't develop any kind of relationship to the other women. She's often characterized by her care for Josh. Ashley only hangs around Chris to develop the potential romance between them.

Teen drama is a staple of this genre; however, the game could've made this more nuanced by letting the female characters interact in complex ways. For example, you

could play as either Jessica or Emily and have them argue about their involvement in the disappearance of Hannah and Beth instead. They could fight about who was really at fault over the prank since Jessica was doing it for Emily and Emily was okay with it because it was a way to stake a claim on her boyfriend. This would show them as figures that have a complex sense of morality, and it helps connect back to the main reason why any of the characters are here. In the original scenario, the female players playing the game will see these two as just the mean girl stereotypes that fight over a man and won't feel a connection to them and thus, might not care whether they live or die. The game could have Jess try to save herself or discover more clues about the mystery of Hannah and Beth while Mike tries to find her. Have Ashley try to help Sam around the lodge as they are being tormented by what they believe to be a psycho stranger but is actually Josh. These new options would give the player the choice to subdue the misogynistic catfight in turn for something more nuanced and complex for either character while keeping the drama aspect. Another addition could be that the prologue could establish the stereotypical tropes of the genre while the present timeline of the game can subvert them.

The game also, again, seriously lacks diversity. The game could have subverted the horror genre in a huge way by including more people of color or non-heterosexual characters. As stated before, horror often consists of white heteronormative characters and any characters included that don't fit that category often die first or are nothing but two-dimensional stereotypes. The game uses Native American folklore and mythology as part of the horror so adding Native American characters would fit and, considering that a major theme of the game is the consequences of desecrating native land, since the Washingtons who own the ski lodge were warned of this, having Indigenous characters would bring this in more.

Highlight

During the game, Mike spends much of the time traversing the mines and abandoned sanatorium to rescue Jessica from whoever or whatever kidnapped her from when they left the group to spend time alone in a cabin. This is a section that truly feels like the character Mike, as the "popular guy who can be a jerk" archetype truly gets turned on its head. In the prologue, he has no qualms to be used to humiliate Hannah. When they meet again a year later, he has no qualms about Emily, his former girlfriend, fighting with Jessica, his current girlfriend. He becomes more of a hero that the player can come to appreciate. Mike is given choices that truly feel like they challenge his archetype. Playing as him, you find out more about the sanatorium and the history behind it. Later in the game he is given a choice on whether to end Emily due to her having been bitten by the Wendigo.

Critical Reception

Upon release in 2015, *Until Dawn* received generally positive reception. Lucy O'Brien, posted on IGN, called the game "a gleefully cheesy homage to horror movies, set in a world by built by a developer that clearly adores the genre" ("Until Dawn Review"). Paul Sullivan from COGconnected said "While Until Dawn lacks complex gameplay, it counters with compelling characters, astounding visuals, and a thought-provoking

storyline" ("Until Dawn Review-Grab Your Nightlight and Dive Into this Masterpiece").
Melanie Emile from CGMagazine said "Until Dawn captured the slasher flick
perfectly…" ("Until Dawn (PS4) Review"), giving the game a score of 91. On Metacritic,
the game scored a 79, while IGN gave it a 7.9/10.

Emile, Melanie. "Until Dawn captured the clasher flick perfectly…" CGMagazine.
August 24, 2015. https://www.cgmagonline.com/review/game/until-dawn-ps4-review/

O'Brien, Lucy. "Until Dawn Review." IGN. August 24, 2015.
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Masterpiece." COGconnected. August 24, 2015. https://cogconnected.com/review/until-
dawn-review/

Lessons

- **Utilize genre tropes to world build.** When working within a well-known genre
  of storytelling, the narrative designer can use well known tropes to establish the
  environment and come up with ways the player can interact with those tropes to
  enhance player immersion, just as the "don't move" feature forces the player to let
  their guard down, allowing them to be thoroughly jump scared. Using the genre
  tropes to establish environmental storytelling helps flesh out a worldbuilding that
  the player will know not to ignore. Horror games often utilize artifacts found in
  creepy sites, so the game uses this to plant totems that give the character valuable
  information. The player will know, in a setting like this, they should explore the
  space more than they probably would.

- **Build complex relationships between characters.** With a cast as big as this one,
  it's important that whatever character relationships are made are complex and
  meaningful. Quality will always trump quantity so if a game has several subpar
  character relationships, the story suffers overall. The game pairs Emily and Matt,
  Jessica and Mike, Chris with Ashley with Josh amongst occasionally, and Sam
  and Josh. Some of these pairings provide complexity in the story but most of them
  are paired predictably and it doesn't provide depth to the story.

- **Don't let genre specific stereotypes and cliches hinder the narrative and its
  accessibility to a wider audience**. The narrative designer should find the line
  where the genre, and its subsequent stereotypes, dictate the game and where
  inclusive narrative storytelling enrichen it. Traditional horror films lack diversity
  seemingly as a rule, however when diversity and inclusion enrichens player
  experience and makes the game more accessible to a wider audience, the narrative

designer should go for it. Have your female characters interact and converse outside the scope of men, for example. If you're going to use a stereotype/cliché as a part of the game, give the player the chance to step out of it and have that path be just as interesting as if the player decides to play along to the cliché.

Summation

Until Dawn plays to the strengths of the horror genre to enhance its world and story, creating an atmosphere that perfectly encapsulates the feeling of being watched in a secluded cabin with a monster on the loose. Although the game can lean too hard into its genre; not providing enough diversity among its cast of characters and opting for keeping stereotypical tropes in said characters and their relationships, the game does give the player the illusion of having control of a narrative that would be frustrating to watch play out but, in game, provides many interesting alternate paths. That in and of itself, helps the game be repayable and enjoyable among groups of friends who can jump at the scares, laugh at the cheesy dialogue, and either cheer for the survivors or groan at their failed attempts.