

# Game Narrative Review

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**Game Title:** *Katana ZERO*

**Platform:** Microsoft Windows, macOS, Nintendo Switch, Microsoft Xbox

**Genre:** Platformer, Action, Adventure

**Release Date:** April 18, 2019

**Developer:** Askiisoft

**Publisher:** Devolver Digital

**Game Writers:** Justin Stander, Eric Shumaker

## Overview

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*Katana ZERO* is a visually striking and emotionally gripping action-platformer that skillfully intertwines its gameplay with a compelling narrative. Set in a dystopian neo-noir world, the game follows the enigmatic character known only as Zero – a highly trained assassin who is haunted by his past and is determined to uncover the truth behind his existence. As Zero, players embark on a blood-soaked journey through a series of challenging levels, all while making morally complex choices that impact the outcome of the story. In an interview with Steven T. Wright, Justin Stander, the developer and writer of the game, highlighted the importance of the interplay between frenetic kill-missions and subdued narrative beats, characterizing it as a fundamental strength of the project. Stander explained, "I always viewed this interplay as a core strength of the project, and I worked very carefully to craft it." (Standar qtd. in Wright)

In this review, I will explore the adept storytelling in *Katana ZERO* that establishes a poignant connection with players. The narrative invites players to empathize with Zero, witnessing the depth of his struggles within a challenging world and, more profoundly, within his own psyche. Each level serves as a narrative puzzle piece, contributing to the overall tapestry of the game's emotionally resonant story.

## Characters

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- **Zero** – the protagonist; served as a NULL in the Cromag War alongside Fifteen. This skilled assassin, selected as a child for the Gamma NULL category due to aggression and mental issues, wields a katana and exhibits incredible precognitive abilities from the experimental drug Chronos. As players navigate Zero's journey, his character reveals vulnerability, internal conflict, and a nuanced sense of morality.
- **Fifteen** – the deuteragonist; a Gamma NULL exposed to Chronos since childhood. Seeking revenge against the government for his creation, Fifteen engages in multiple clashes with Zero throughout the game. With the ability to perceive time slowly and

glimpse into the future, Fifteen adds complexity to the narrative and shares a tumultuous history with Zero.

- **Psychiatrist** – the major antagonist; The Psychiatrist, operating as a New Mecca government operative, is an enigmatic, controlling, and manipulative character, who provides Chronos and assignments to Zero, appearing professional on the surface but harboring disdain for Zero's violent tendencies. His subtle manipulation of Zero adds complexity to the game's psychological elements and storyline. Dressed in a distinctive maroon suit, the Psychiatrist uses his influence to exploit Zero's vulnerabilities, guiding him toward the government's agenda. Eventually, he becomes a central figure in unraveling Zero's past and the mysteries surrounding Chronos.
- **V** – the antagonist; Russian gangster hired by a mysterious organization to reintroduce Chronos into public circulation. His explicitly sadistic nature is evident through torturous acts against those connected to Chronos. With vibrant blue hair and a menacing demeanor, V's presence adds tension to the narrative, presenting a formidable adversary with a direct link to Zero's past.
- **Leon Von Alvensleben** – a minor antagonist; the creator of Chronos and the NULL project. While a minor character, his influence looms large over the story's overarching themes.
- **Little Girl** – the supporting character; The Little Girl, characterized by two playful pigtails, remains shrouded in speculation about her true nature. Acting as a psychological manifestation of Zero's morality and last semblance of innocence, she represents his conscience and regret related to child killings during the war. Her existence remains uncertain, contributing to the game's mysterious and introspective atmosphere.
- **The Masked Men** – the supporting antagonists, also referred to as Comedy and Tragedy; with their distinctive, hunchbacked, and creepy movement, they often appear to warn Zero about impending life and death choices. Shrouded in mystery, these enigmatic figures appear as hallucinations, challenging players to confront their subconscious and make uncertain choices throughout the game.

## Breakdown

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*Katana ZERO* stands out in the action-adventure game genre by forging a deep connection with the players, causing them to involuntarily reflect on the game's scenarios. With its emotional impact, the game creates a more intense and personal connection with the players, while also offering gratifying gameplay. It takes science fiction concepts, infusing them with a human and tangible feel. Yet its true addictive charm lies in the depth of its narrative. The game's story, rich in meaning and thought-provoking themes, sets it apart, turning it into an immersive experience that goes beyond typical gaming enjoyment.

In *Katana ZERO*, the central theme revolves around the profound struggle of the protagonist, Zero, as he confronts the challenges presented by life. Despite the obstacles he encounters, the game depicts Zero's relentless fight for truth, encapsulating the deep-seated battles within one's inner self. In an interview with Steven T. Wright, Justin Stander states: "I knew pretty early on that I wanted to have a character who was sort of trapped in their situation because those always make for good main characters in action games." (Stander qtd. in Wright)

The narrative is centered around Zero because of his unique combination of skills, vulnerability, and the mysterious circumstances of his past. His journey is a key element in unraveling the mysteries of the drug, Chronos, the Psychiatrist, and the dystopian world of

*Katana ZERO* overall. The emotional depth and internal conflicts he faces make him a central figure in the game's storytelling.

Zero's central flaw is rooted in his vulnerability to manipulation and his heavy reliance on Chronos. This dependence not only renders him vulnerable to external control but also distorts his perception of reality, blurring the lines between truth and illusion. Throughout the narrative, this flaw serves as a pivotal point of conflict, sparking internal struggles that shape the trajectory of Zero's journey. Flashbacks, withdrawal effects, and fragmented storytelling expose the origins of his flaw, providing players with insights into the psychological battles he fights.

*Katana ZERO* unfolds through the lens of the protagonist's cyclical existence, structured in a series of 11 levels, known as Tapes. Each level comprises three distinct phases – Psychiatry, Mission, and Home – creating a structured rhythm to Zero's daily life. The day starts at home, moves to a psychiatry session discussing mission results with the Psychiatrist, delves into dream discussions, and includes a dose of the "medicine" and a dossier detailing the next target, which is burned afterward. The subsequent mission involves navigating through rooms and battling enemies to reach the target, who then shares snippets of Zero's lore – details about the war, the NULL soldiers, or Chronos. Upon returning home, the setting includes the eerie backdrop of TV reports on mass killings, a calming herbal tea routine, potential interactions with the mysterious Little Girl, and sleeping that sometimes leads to nightmares or hallucinations. The cycle repeats with a countdown of days.

The game compels the players to piece together information from various elements: the Psychiatrist, other characters, the Little Girl, the Masked Men, and, finally, the nightmares. This allows for diverse interpretations, engaging the players' thoughts in determining the most plausible explanation.

## **The Psychiatrist**

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The Psychiatrist in *Katana ZERO* plays a crucial role in shaping Zero's journey, influencing him both mentally and emotionally. While seemingly guiding Zero, the Psychiatrist's actions contribute to a web of deception.

One key impact is through Chronos, or "medicine," as the Psychiatrist likes to call it, given to Zero by him. This substance affects Zero's perception of reality and adds uncertainty to his understanding of events. Notably, the Psychiatrist knew from the first mention of Zero's nightmare that it was Zero's real-life trauma from seven years ago, but chose to lie, deepening the layers of deception.

The Psychiatrist deliberately withholds crucial information, contributing to the confusion surrounding Zero's nightmares. After discussing a recurring nightmare, the Psychiatrist confuses Zero by claiming he is the little boy, not the ominous, killing shadow. This intentional obfuscation adds to the mystery of Zero's past.

The Psychiatrist's indifference to Zero's well-being is evident as he prioritizes self-preservation. He views Zero as no more than a "junkie" and a "subhuman," showcasing a profound lack of empathy. This dehumanizing perspective underscores the Psychiatrist's disregard for viewing Zero as a human. This indifference becomes evident in the last moments of the game, where the Psychiatrist panics and displays a singular concern for himself: "I need to leave. There's no time, I need to get out of here." This self-centered reaction highlights the transactional nature of their relationship, further emphasizing the absence of genuine care or support from the Psychiatrist.

The Psychiatrist's impact on Zero involves manipulation, deliberate lies, dehumanization, and a clear lack of empathy. This adds to the narrative of struggle, deception, and Zero's relentless pursuit of truth.

## Other Characters

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Other than the Psychiatrist, Zero encounters many other characters throughout his missions, which significantly contribute to the unfolding narrative. The cruel Russian gangster, V, serves as a formidable adversary, embodying the harsh and unforgiving nature of the world of *Katana ZERO*. His interactions with Zero show the brutality of the missions and the moral complexities that Zero confronts. The Russian Gangster's presence challenges Zero's resolve and forces him to confront the harsh realities of his actions.

John Rose, on the other hand, introduces a layer of surprise and intrigue. Despite not being a NULL soldier himself, John Rose's existence raises questions about Zero's identity and the broader implications of the NULL project. He seems to have remorse for the actions Zero undertook while using Chronos, pushing Zero to confront the shadows of his past.

DJ Electrohead provides information about the mysterious drug, offering insights into the broader conspiracy that surrounds Zero's missions. The quest for truth becomes more complex as Zero navigates the web of secrets and deceit woven by the influential figures in the game.

The encounter with the Old Veteran reveals the repercussions of Zero's actions, as the veteran expresses dissatisfaction over being labeled a Cromag due to his service medal. This interaction serves as a reflection of the societal consequences of Zero's missions, adding a moral aspect to his journey.

The Dragon, initially presented as an enigmatic figure, becomes a key player in the narrative. Unraveling the connection between the Dragon, the soldier who talked to him (revealed to be the Headhunter), and the broader context of Chronos and the NULL project adds layers to Zero's quest for truth.

The war veterans at the bar contribute to the exploration of the combat drug and the impact it had on those who experienced it. Zero, nicknamed "baby face," stands out for his youthful appearance and lack of physical scars. Unlike most war veterans who bear visible injuries, Zero's scars are confined to his mind. This distinction emphasizes the internal struggles he contends with.

Leon, with his NULL Project failure, introduces a theme of experimentation and its consequences. The revelation of a failed project adds to the intrigue surrounding Zero's own existence, pushing him further into the complex labyrinth of his identity.

The encounter with the family in the safe room becomes a pivotal moment, highlighting Zero's capacity for redemption. Choosing to spare the family, despite the chaos surrounding them, demonstrates his internal battle against becoming a mere weapon, revealing a glimmer of humanity within him.

Collectively, these characters contribute to Zero's relentless fight for truth by unveiling layers of deception, morality, and personal consequences. The intricate web of relationships and revelations challenges Zero's understanding of himself and his mission, showcasing the internal battles that define his journey in *Katana ZERO*.

## The Little Girl

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Amidst the brutal characters and moral ambiguity of Zero's journey, a recurring and mysterious presence comes to the forefront: the Little Girl. Initially introduced as seemingly

annoying, she symbolizes the goodness within Zero, and her role advances to become a key element in the unfolding of Zero's truth.

The Little Girl's innocence and love for silly dinosaur toys provide a refreshing contrast to the violent world Zero navigates. Her presence offers moments of respite for Zero, softening his tough exterior and revealing a more humane side to him.

The transition between Zero's fourth and fifth nightmares shows a notable change in Zero's mindset. In the fourth nightmare, while playing with young Zero, the Little Girl transforms into one of the dinosaur toys, obscuring the understanding between what's real and imagined. In the fifth nightmare, young Zero plays with the dinosaur toy instead of the Little Girl. This suggests that the Little Girl might be an imaginary friend, offering comfort to Zero amid the chaos of his dreams. The interchangeable presence of the Little Girl and the dinosaur toy hints at a deeper emotional connection, symbolizing her role as a source of reassurance and companionship in Zero's inner world.

Whether real or a product of Zero's imagination, the belief in her existence becomes a catalyst for positive change within him. Players are inclined to see her as a representation of the goodness that can emerge even in the darkest of circumstances. This collective hope that even a character as complex and tormented as Zero can find redemption and connection leads to the desire to believe in her existence.

The emotional climax occurs when the Masked Men taunt the Little Girl after taking her, warning of a "baleful end." This reveals the consequences of Zero's choices: the trade-off of "one life for another." His desperate rush to save her highlights the depth of his commitment to protecting her purity.

## **The Masked Men**

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The Masked Men in *Katana ZERO* symbolize Zero's consequences of his choices. First appearing during withdrawal after missing just one day of Chronos dosage, the Masked Men surround Zero, prompting a confrontation between life and death. Referencing the Little Girl as a symbol of Zero's conscience, their presence forces Zero to think about the moral implications of his actions.

During the withdrawal sequence, 688 days into the future, the Masked Men reappear, mocking Zero as he experiences the painful effects of withdrawal. This scene mirrors the old veteran's plea the players saw before, highlighting the cyclical nature of suffering and the enduring consequences of Zero's involvement with Chronos.

In their third appearance, the Masked Men force Zero to choose between life as a villain without inner goodness, symbolized by the Little Girl, or death as a hero with the good inside him. This further reveals the internal struggle Zero faces when players decide what they want to choose. No one knows what the right choice actually is because everyone is forced to choose for themselves what is morally right.

As mentioned before, the emotional climax occurs when the Masked Men taunt the Little Girl after taking her. The Masked Men become a manifestation of the consequences of Zero's actions, reinforcing the theme of the relentless pursuit of truth. Their role in critical moments challenges Zero to confront the moral ambiguities of his choices and navigate the complexities of his own conscience. They haunt him like the recurring nightmare does.

## The Nightmare

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The nightmare serves as a haunting element that significantly impacts Zero throughout the game. It shows not only the emotional battles the protagonist must go through, but also how his self-awareness becomes particularly pronounced.

After Zero shares the nightmare with the Psychiatrist and encounters the Little Girl, its portrayal undergoes a transformative shift. Initially, the dream presents an unknown boy playing with another child, and an ominous shadow killing a scientist. The Psychiatrist, in his guidance, redirects the narrative, suggesting that Zero is the little boy. This not only makes Zero question how he sees himself but also implies that Zero is more of a victim in the situation, rather than being portrayed as the one causing harm. Meeting the Little Girl further clarifies the connections within the nightmare: the dream evolves, revealing that the child is someone Zero knows, the Little Girl, and the narrative dynamic shifts.

Another pivotal moment in the evolution of the nightmare is the discovery that the Headhunter is a Null soldier, marked by her green uniform. This revelation reshapes the narrative within the dream, altering the identity of the unknown shadow: instead of an abstract figure killing the scientist and destroying the machine, it is now revealed to be a Null soldier. This connects the dream to the broader context of Zero's involvement in the Null project.

The culmination of the nightmare's development occurs at the very end of the game. Zero discovers that the recurring dream is a fragment of his life from seven years ago – a traumatic moment where he followed orders to kill people. The dream, initially shrouded in mystery and abstract symbolism, becomes a reflection of regret and the weight of past actions.

The recurring nightmare in *Katana ZERO* is a dynamic and evolving element that challenges Zero's understanding of himself and his past. It serves as a narrative device that, with the guidance of the Psychiatrist, unravels the layers of symbolism, ultimately revealing the deep regrets and complexities within Zero's psyche. The nightmare becomes a poignant reflection of Zero's relentless fight for truth and the internal battles that define his journey.

In conclusion, *Katana ZERO* masterfully embodies the central theme of Zero's profound struggle, vividly illustrating his relentless fight for truth in a chaotic world. The game transcends mere entertainment by delving into what can be termed as the "human experience" — a portrayal and exploration of universal themes, emotions, and struggles that resonate on a deep, personal level.

The Psychiatrist, serving as a manipulative guide, ignites Zero's internal conflicts and challenges his perception of reality. The nightmares, evolving from abstract symbolism to a poignant reflection of past traumas, add layers of depth to Zero's struggles. Characters encountered throughout the journey contribute to the tapestry of moral ambiguity that shapes Zero's understanding of himself.

*Katana ZERO* is not just a game; it's a testament to the resilience of the human spirit. Zero's pursuit of truth becomes a universal metaphor, urging players to reflect on their own inner battles. The game's success lies in its ability to deliver a narrative that resonates on a profound level, leaving a lasting impact and validating the central theme that life's struggles are, indeed, a relentless fight for truth.

# Narrative Structure

The fragmented and non-linear storytelling in *Katana Zero* mirrors the protagonist's fractured mental state, engaging players in piecing together the narrative puzzle while challenging the perception of reality. This approach not only immerses players in the internal conflicts of the protagonist but also aligns with the neo-noir elements: an empathetic antihero, moral ambiguity, paranoia, violence, self-reflexivity, a discreet visual style, and, of course, a complex narrative structure.

Zero, the central character, stands as an empathetic antihero, and the narrative is uniquely tailored to align with Zero's perspective. Players, embodying Zero, confront dilemmas, where the distinction between right and wrong becomes increasingly unclear. This narrative technique places players in the shoes of the protagonist, making every decision and consequence feel personal.

The discreet visual style of *Katana ZERO*, influenced by neo-noir aesthetics, uses a dark yet vividly neon cityscape with diligent lighting and color choices, reminiscent of VHS aesthetics. This inclusion of VHS elements adds a layer of nostalgia, enhancing the atmospheric experience. The city becomes a character, revealing its own secrets to those willing to explore its depths.

In shaping *Katana ZERO*'s narrative, Justin Stander aimed for a cinematic feel, a goal he effectively realized. In an interview with Michael Leri, the developer expressed his intention to "defy expectations." Stander's narrative strategy, as he described it, was to initially make players comfortable and then deliberately disrupt that comfort: "I really mess with the player." (Stander qtd. in Leri). The fractured storytelling becomes a tool to deepen player engagement, making every revelation, twist, and moment of self-reflection impactful.

I have organized the narrative into a structured table detailing the chronological order of all levels, including target assignments (first column); key moments before, during, and after missions; and a nightmare/hallucination column. During the day, Zero's Chronos intake is marked as follows: ✓ for a normal dose, — for no dose, and + for an increased dose. For brevity, the Psychologist is abbreviated to "P". Nightmare cells are highlighted in magenta, while hallucinations are in pink for clarity.



*The following spreadsheet shows the narrative structure of Katana ZERO in action:*

Level & Target		Before	During	After	
	Dose	Key Moment			Nightmare / Hallucinations
Factory Rescue the scientist	✓	P assigns Zero a mission over the phone.	Attempts to save a scientist, but he fails. Encounters the laughing Russian gangster.	Zero relies on a calming herbal tea routine for sleep.	A boy plays ball with the shadow of another child. An adult silhouette transforms into a large shadow moving toward the two children.

Hotel John Rose	✓	P suggests the shadow of an adult is a scientist and the little boy is Zero.	Meets John Rose, surprised by the existence of multiple NULL soldiers.	Meets the Little Girl, annoyed by her presence.	Young Zero plays ball with the shadow of the Little Girl. A scientist runs in, talking incoherently. An unknown shadow abruptly shoots the scientist and the child.
Club DJ Electrohead	✓	P hints that the scientist was cautioning Zero. Reveals Zero's wartime injury.	Talks to DJ Electrohead, gaining information about the mysterious drug.	Little Girl near Zero's apartment door prompts a search for her toy, Leviathan, a blue dinosaur.	Young Zero plays ball with the shadow of the Little Girl. A scientist runs in, speaking incoherently. An unknown shadow shoots the scientist and turns the little girl into the dinosaur Leviathan.
Prison Fa Yuan	—	Their mission's goal to prevent the drug from reaching the wrong hands.	With everyone dead, it's evident that Zero isn't the sole killer. Zero kills a dissatisfied veteran labeled as a Cromag.	Little Girl gives a video tape, featuring the Russian gangster's brutality towards Zero's neighbors.	Young Zero plays with Leviathan alone. Scientist warns him to hide. An unknown shadow shoots the scientist and types something on the computer.
Studio No target	—	Office is closed.	Faces off with the blue-haired Russian, declines teaming up, and, struggling, wins. Warned by a lady in a white kimono about their next encounter.	The Little Girl is trick or treating.	Zero, without medicine, paralyzed and surrounded by Masked Men, faces a choice between life and death. They emphasize the Little Girl symbolizing Zero's conscience, forecasting a future choice in 3 days.
Withdrawal Al-Qasim	+	A flashback to the game's intro implies withdrawal effects erasing memories of the session. // See Hallucinations cell.	Withdrawal sequence: 1. In a psychiatry visit, glitches occur, and Zero is unexpectedly punched by the Russian. 2. In the cathedral scene, a war veteran reveals drug effects, recounting vivid memories from the "jungle." 3. 688 days into the future, Zero begs, echoing the veteran's plea, with Masked Men mocking his withdrawal experience. The scene shifts to P giving Zero the dose. // See the Before column.		



Mansion Al-Qasim.	—	Appointment missed.	Deals with V, and escapes after enduring multiple deaths and outsmarting V. A swordsman, the *actual* Dragon, kills V.	Visits a bar, encounters war veterans, learning about the war and the combat drug. Returns home drunk, and struggles to understand the Little Girl.	N/A
Chinatown & Drg. Tape The Dragon	✓	Zero clarifies that he is not the Dragon, which makes your target the *real* Dragon.	Overhears the Dragon and a soldier discussing revenge, V's connection to Chronos, and Al-Qasim being the Chronos drug dealer. Zero gets surrounded by police and the Masked Men appear. //See the to Hallucinations cell.	Watches a movie with the Little Girl, plays the Dragon tape, revealing Fifteen as the guard killer. Fa Yuan discloses Leon von Alvensleben as Chronos' creator.	Players decide between living as a villain without inner goodness or dying as a hero with goodness (symbolized by the Little Girl).
Sltr. house Leon V. A.	—	Appointment missed.  Unidentified caller provides information about Leon Von Alvensleben while Zero is en route to the P's office.	Discovers the failed NULL Project through Leon. Faces an intense trial and discovers he's a Gamma NULL. Finds Leon in a cryotank, causing Leon to age and disintegrate.	Little Girl leads Zero to the rooftop, where he discards his service medal, symbolizing a shift in motivation toward protecting her from the Masked Men. // See Highlight section.	N/A

<p>Bunker Pt. 1 Eliminate the <i>sensitive material</i> in the safe room.</p>		<p>P, shocked, learns about Zero's knowledge of Chronos/NULL soldiers/Leon.</p>	<p>Faces the Headhunter, learns a female soldier's NULL status, connection to Fifteen (the Dragon), and history as a contract killer for Al-Qasim. In the safe room, Zero discovers a family and to spares them, demonstrating redemption and uncovering the truth behind the dream.</p>	<p>N/A</p>	<p>Young Zero plays with Leviathan alone. Scientist warns him to hide. The shadow, revealed as a NULL soldier, shoots him and types on the computer.</p>
<p>Bunker Pt. 2 Zero (if he questions his past or disobeys orders)</p>		<p>P panics due to Zero's disobedience, fearing mutual demise. Zero confronts him, leading to a withdrawal-fueled rage and the brutal killing of P.</p>	<p>N/A</p>	<p>Police is at Zero's apartment due to break-in and neighbor's murder. Little Girl missing with a note: "One life for another." Zero runs off.</p>	<p>The nightmare's revelation: Seven years earlier, a little boy hides as a scientist warns about NULL soldiers. The soldier, later revealed as Zero, triggers a self-destructing machine, picks up Leviathan. Zero and Fifteen receive orders to return to base, ending with a burning village by the seaside, as described in the withdrawal cathedral moment.</p>

## Strongest Element

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The most compelling element of *Katana ZERO* lies in the narrative's masterful construction, culminating in the player's final understanding of the recurring dream. Throughout the game, they are immersed in a world of uncertainty, confronting cryptic dreams and fragmented memories. The gradual realization that they are not the child in the dream but the mysterious figure responsible for killing the scientist and sabotaging the machine is a narrative twist of profound impact. This revelation goes beyond a simple plot twist; it challenges players to confront the complexities of human nature. The developers skillfully pushed the feeling of unease onto the player by forcing them to embody a character who is not easily classified as purely good or bad. In doing so, *Katana ZERO* delves into the discomfort of acknowledging the multifaceted and morally ambiguous aspects of the protagonist's identity. The game prompts players to grapple with the unsettling realization that, as Zero, they are both victim and perpetrator, blurring the lines between right and wrong and adding a layer of psychological depth to the narrative. This deliberate exploration of moral ambiguity contributes to the immersive and thought-provoking experience of *Katana ZERO*. Playing the game becomes an immersive detective experience, tempting players to tie the threads of the story together, and the final realization not only ties the threads together but also forces players to reassess their understanding of Zero's character. The way the game reveals its story makes a lasting impact on players, turning *Katana ZERO* into more than just an action game; it delves into questions of identity and self-awareness.

## Unsuccessful Element

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One aspect where *Katana ZERO* could improve is the limited impact of player choices. While the game highlights the importance of decisions, the outcomes do not significantly shape the overall narrative, missing an opportunity for a more engaging and dynamic storytelling experience. The presence of only two distinct endings (with the third one involving a secret optional boss fight) limits the potential branching narratives, which may reduce players' motivation to explore alternative choices. To enhance overall narrative engagement, the game could benefit from a more intricate web of branching narratives. For instance, introducing divergent story arcs or character interactions based on specific decisions could create more noticeable and consequential outcomes, providing players with a richer and more personalized experience. This expansion of choices could elevate the overall player experience.

## Highlight

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In my view, the most memorable part of *Katana Zero* is the scene on the rooftop with the little girl. In this serene setting, the city's beauty stands out against the chaos and violence that usually surround Zero. It's a brief break from the constant challenges that shape his life.

The symbolism becomes clear as Zero shows his service medal, a reminder of a time when he did good things. It becomes a simple connection to the past, where morality mattered more than the harsh world he's in now. But the narrative takes an unexpected turn as Zero throws the medal off the rooftop, symbolizing his willingness to let go of the past and acknowledging that his motivations have changed. The little girl, with her innocence, becomes his new source of hope, representing something pure in a world filled with darkness.

Their interaction, characterized by vulnerability and a promise of protection, adds emotional weight to the story. This simple yet impactful scene is a delicate interlude that humanizes Zero, offering players a glimpse into the character beyond his role as an assassin.

## Critical Reception

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***Destructoid Review by CJ Andriessen (Score: 9/10)*** – The reviewer, expressing a sentiment similar to the impact of *Twin Peaks: The Return*, emphasizes the transformative experience of *Katana ZERO*, stating that the game “had the exact same effect on me.” The narrative, difficult to discuss without spoilers, is praised for its dream-like nature and open-ended interpretations influenced by Phillip K. Dick and Akira Kurosawa, creating a narrative that reads differently for each player. The reviewer expresses an overwhelming love for *Katana ZERO*, describing it as “bleak, beautiful, bloody, and brilliant” – a hallmark of excellence with negligible flaws that won't detract from the overall experience.

***IGN Review by Mitchell Saltzman (Score: 8.7/10)*** – Mitchell Saltzman praises *Katana ZERO* as a masterfully executed slash-em-up that borrows from *Hotline Miami* but adds its own refreshing twist. He hails the game's unique one-hit-kill formula and praises the protagonist's time-manipulating powers, especially the optional slow-mo effect that adds a strategic edge to the action. The reviewer appreciates the game's visual flair, with a slick neon aesthetic, impressive sprite work, and standout 2D lighting effects, accompanied by a fitting retro-electro soundtrack. He highlights the strong writing and the interesting characters, but for him, it did not reach the highs of the action because of some narrative inconsistencies. His biggest issue is the fact that “very little is resolved by the time the credits roll.” However, he sees *Katana ZERO* as a tight and memorable four to six hours of gaming, eagerly anticipating potential sequels or DLCs to explore the narrative further.

***Game Informer Review by Joe Juba (Score: 7.75/10)*** – Juba sees *Katana ZERO* as a stylish action/puzzle hybrid that peaks early but struggles to maintain the same level of excitement throughout the journey. Juba applauds the game for making players feel like “genius assassination architects” as they conquer challenging screens through careful planning. However, the excitement of navigating through the levels in the game is dampened by frustrating design elements. Guards, crucial to executing plans, don't consistently return to default positions after a screen reset, introducing hindering randomness that disrupts the flow of the game. The static moveset also loses its luster as the game progresses, lacking fresh strategies to keep the experience dynamic. The reviewer highlights that despite a strong start with an intriguing story, the narrative falls short of expectations, wandering cryptically without a satisfying conclusion.

## Lessons

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### 1) *Emotional Impact through Character Depth:*

The depth of characters in *Katana ZERO* contributes significantly to the emotional impact of the narrative. Zero's vulnerability, Fifteen's revenge-driven motivations, and the enigmatic nature of the Little Girl all add layers to the storytelling. The lesson here is that investing time in character development can elevate a game's narrative, making the player's connection with the characters more profound.

### 2) *Effective Use of Symbolism*

The game effectively employs symbolism to convey deeper meanings and themes. The recurring nightmares, the Little Girl, and the rooftop scene are symbolic elements that enrich the narrative. The lesson is that well-executed symbolism can add complexity to the storytelling, providing players with thought-provoking elements. For example, the rooftop scene, where Zero discards his medal, symbolizes his willingness to let go of the past, adding a layer of meaning to the narrative.

### 3) **Cinematic Narrative Design**

The game's developer, Justin Stander, aimed for a cinematic feel, deliberately disrupting player expectations. The lesson is that a game's narrative design can benefit from cinematic techniques to create memorable and impactful storytelling moments. For instance, the fractured storytelling and unexpected twists in *Katana ZERO* mirror cinematic approaches, keeping players engaged and invested in the unfolding narrative.

## Summation

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*Katana ZERO* stands out for its incredible story that mixes intense action with complex characters. The fragmented storytelling mirrors the protagonist's fractured mental state, engaging players in a puzzle of reality and perception. The game's strongest element lies in the profound revelation of the recurring dream, turning it into a thought-provoking experience that goes beyond typical gaming narratives. Memorable moments, like the rooftop scene with the Little Girl, humanize Zero and add emotional depth. The direct participation in the narrative makes it much more engaging than watching a movie because you directly become a participant in the story. In most games, one can find a cohesive narrative; however, *Katana ZERO*'s story is a chaotic mess, much like the ever-changing positions and constellations in the night sky; you can never know where one star shines and the other goes supernova.

## Citation

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