As games about World War 2 are abundant, it may sometimes be a good idea to find a different themed game for entertainment. This was most surely goal Monolith Productions had when it chose to provide the gaming audience with a more-than-satiric version of famous spy movies like James Bond and Mission Impossible. Personifying Cate Archer, a not-so-proved spy amongst UNITY, a secret world protection agency, the player is put against an evil organization, HARM, aiming at conquering the world with terror.

Given the game’s date of release, fall 2000, I was surprised to witness gameplay and themes that were, by times even more relevant than today’s games. Starting with the main character, Mrs. Archer is hands down one of the best models when it comes to contemporary video-games.

The heroine has all the qualities that are required to be a spy and an ideal. Her self-confidence and her ability for spontaneous retorts gain their golden status only when put in the context that the developer so realistically elaborated: Cate’s presence in the agency provokes all but unanimous excitement. Every briefing is made of verbal jousts between her and one of the two executives in charge of dispatching her. Sexist arguments are often used by her detractors, but Archer always has a good line to defend herself without holding back her thoughts. Flexible dialogs gives the player the opportunity to choose between a polite or a more aggressive answers to disagreeable comments.

Settings are most interesting when both sides of the coins are showed: the heroine both fails and succeeds depending on missions and fortunately, while part of the agency disapproves her presence on important missions, there is always someone to believe in her. Over the times, she becomes one of the agency’s most valuable assets, giving the adversity she has been through a meaning. Above that, the main character even manages to end up laughing about her old underdog status, showing great maturity and therefore forcing the player to identify themselves to her.

Action gets in the way pretty quickly as the agent Archer is moved from useless filatures to bigger assignments related to the HARM threat. The game proves to be a resourceful one when it comes to varying way for the player to achieve its objectives. Most of missions can be successfully completed by using stealth or, for adrenaline-rushes fans, dispatching everyone. Although, some missions are more directive than others and provide restrictions on where or not you should be detected. It is done in such a way there is a good equilibrium between types of missions. In your first encounters, you might pick a lock with your barrette, in another you will be forced to light a trash can on fire to lure away a guard from his post; there is a lot of tools that the game provides the player with, giving a plurality of ways to deal with scenarios.

If the name of both organizations have not ring any bells yet, we are reveal early on enough that the narrative setting of the game is one of the most mocking, speaking in terms of stereotypes and spreading absurdity on every given occasion. Every missions are extremely dangerous operations when you read you objectives but once you get on the field, things take a different turn. Gathering intelligence makes you stumble upon love letters from soldiers’ wives, retirement letters and complaints about the evil-doing minions’ work place, each of which is integrally available for your farcical amusement.

As they succeed to each other, assignments expose you to cut-scenes where evil masterminds have meaningless conversations with their minions, depicting the idiocy of both in an amusing way. Your stealthier missions will force you to overhear soldiers’ trivial conversations about household tasks, car preferences or even witness courtship attempts. This discontinuity in themes come at most unsuspecting moments and is most of the time welcomed as this parallel experience provides a bit of relief to the action stretches.

Stepping from the mold again, the game has a surprisingly large amount of female antagonists. One of HARM’s elite guards troop is composed of three women and two other major villain are women. In fact, if you omit the overwhelming number of male guards, there are a majority of female enemies, which comes to a surprise considering the represented state of minority when it comes to women and video-games.

Most of modern games tell stories through quests or other seamless ways so gameplay is kept uninterrupted. This may be more vicious that we might have realized it. Exceptions aside, I realized the multiple cinematics from No One Lives Forever delivered a rich story in a way I have not seen for long amongst action games of the genre. A spy story is always an intriguing one and this game does not stray away from the par. Keeping its humorous tone, it tells a story about both a women and a spy. Seeing the character evolve through challenges are as compelling as the developing intrigue.

I never had a Nintendo 64 and therefore never played Golden Eye seriously. Many might claim this is an outrage or even blasphemy, but I am confident that Cate Archer’s universe is one of the best, if not the best, and most interesting spying game out there. For its sense of humor, characters and liberty it gives to the player, this game deserves attention even fourteen years after its release.

Pros:

Great story

Many possibilities to achieve objectives

Humorous tone

Excellent female model

Cons

Some few collision bugs

The Operative: No One Lives Forever is a soup of serious spying agencies, evil masterminds and mockeries about all of this. The game manages to tell an interesting story without sacrificing any gameplay elements. While the game revolves about infiltration, it gives the player plenty of space to decide how they want to do so, whether it be in a stealthy of explosive way. The outcome of this is a game that remains relevant over decades in which every minutes invested in it are worth it.