

Mario Egocheaga

Prof. Bertozzi

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Hotline Miami: Anti-Violence in a Violent Video Game

Hotline Miami is a top-down indie game developed by Dennaton Games that has the player take control of an unknown assailant that is forced to commit killing sprees on unknowing Russian gangsters' level after level in a stylized fever dream of the 1980's aesthetic. Narratively, the game is constantly questioning why the player is attracted to the violence and constantly committing atrocities in game continuously with no repercussion, but through mechanics, and the life of the player being as vulnerable as the enemies he faces creates an addicting adrenaline loop that keeps players slashing and executing consistently in moment-to-moment gameplay. This combination of story and message to gamers and use of an addicting gameplay loop creates a game that judges the player for a normalized routine seen in modern games that we never think about twice anymore. This analysis will cover aspects of how Dennaton creates value in forcing the player to play violently, while also creating a contrasting narrative and message on the use of violence in videogames.

Hotline Miami on the surface is about a sociopathic unnamed silent protagonist that receives phone calls daily from unknown men subtly forcing him to go to locations and asking to discreetly execute everyone in the level for payment and safety. The protagonist is an unreliable narrator, and hints of his slow descent into insanity are always sprinkled throughout the game to get the player to analyze the greater picture. However, for this analysis we won't be discussing



the world narrative
as what's more
important is
studying the huge
contrast between
gameplay and the
main narrative.

Gameplay

consists of our character going through the level making split second decisions in order to kill everyone in the level in quick succession. The enemies are easy to take down, but in return the player is as vulnerable as them, making their lives more important as one little mistake means restarting the level over again. However, it is designed as an arcade style game where the continuous kills, the higher the combo, the higher the score the player receives. This is constant encouragement for the player to continue playing as a maniac and take more risks while desensitizing the concept of death through the executions of the enemies the player encounters and the quick respawn once they inevitably die repeatedly. This combination of elements is the greatest backdrop for Dennaton to experiment with player mentality in a videogame, and a great example of internal, external components to a videogame. Internally, the game is asking the player to question why they find so much enjoyment in horrifically murdering, while externally the gameplay makes the whole murder spree as addicting and encouraging as possible.

One big factor as to why players are also encouraged to play this violent way is the curated soundtrack that plays throughout the game, and the lack thereof when the player completes a level. To solidify the message of violence as being this subject of use to enhance gameplay and prove a



point; is how the level starts with music that fits well with the aesthetics and the gameplay loop. High octane beats that go well with the murder spree that keeps the player in a

trance like state, murdering and enjoying the game as intended, but as the last enemy is killed, the music stops, and the player is forced to walk back and “admire” what has remained. It’s an eerie walk back to the car, and its abruptness is intentional and jarring to keep the focus of what violence in a game really looks like. It all seemed like a joy ride but seeing the countless bodies of mangled mobsters and the red pixel splatters surrounding the entire level, it’s hard to not feel disturbed, or just simply taken aback. The disturbing episodes are usually cut short as once the player enters the car, they immediately resume the music, and a loading screen appears as if nothing happened. It’s very effective, in terms of having the player question the madness that just ensued from that point, and only gets elaborated on further when story sections occur, and figures of the protagonist come into the story.

In Hotline Miami, the entire roster of enemies minus a few boss battles all can die in one hit, it’s laughably easy to take out one enemy so long as you’re aware of them. However, since enemies die quickly, you die quickly just like them, and the odds are against you in every level. The only advantage you have against them is you can plan before you can attempt a level, and unlike the enemies, you simply can restart. In Hotline Miami, you are expected to die, in many gruesome ways as possible, death comes just as easy, and since the game is rapid in its

movement and action, the respawn happens instantaneously. This allows you to get right back into the action without a second thought with just a press of the button. The players will get used to the idea of death and be accustomed to when they make a mistake. This in turn causes the player to neglect planning and slow playing, for faster, more ruthless play styles that may give the player a better score overall. This idea of making death just a temporary millisecond pause to the action causes the player to be more open with death rather than concerning themselves to the gruesome violence. Almost mimicking the emotions and mindset of the troubled protagonist rather than a normal human being. In the words of CloudControl, “Making the player fall into a routine where they don’t need to think about what a kill will look like; they only care about how to initiate it and how to proceed afterwards. When you see the same Russian gangsters get killed in similar manners, it becomes something you accept, and it doesn’t bother you anymore.”

Seeing brutality to continue a story, while not really questioning humanity or the lack of it when brutally murdering an entire household of enemies is an interesting technique to prove a point. It’s also an easy way to enrage the player quite easily, as the loop really could drive a person to the edge after numerous failures. If the player can’t keep up with the number of enemies and the pace, they could easily be overwhelmed, thus causing a quick restart to try again. The accomplishment people feel when completing a level there is a sense of euphoria as this once daunting task is finally finished, the only problem is the comedown once the level ends and you having to backtrack through the chaos.

The narrative is controlled chaos, as players are left with more questions than answers, the whole game is centered around the protagonist, and their daily lives of execution and murder. If the players pay attention to the nuance of the story and the world building, they will realize

that in the grand scheme of things, the protagonist is xenophobic, and so is the movement that he stands behind that is making him, and many other nationalistic men commit these crimes.



As described by Jacob Geller” The experience of Hotline Miami isn’t one of international intrigue and crime-web dynamics, it’s playing a guy who kills joyfully and unquailingly over and over”. While the world narrative

to explain the game is more important, in the first game and the main discussion of this paper, the world was left more ambiguous due to it not being the focus at all. In this sense at the start of the game, the player and the protagonist are aligned, as they are succumbed to the violence willingly, literally asked to go to a location and to discreetly take out any vermin related everyday object on the phone, and the player and the protagonist simply agree as the level starts. It’s a sick twisted way to make us relate to a disturbing character that purposely was written to be flawed, someone who seems to be very proud of what they’re doing until they were forced to execute a homeless civilian who stood in the way, this is one of the few times we see humanity in him as he vomits a few steps away from his corpse.



“I think our main takeaway from Hotline Miami is supposed to be introspection on why we enjoy these things so much. The far more likely end to the game, without all the puzzle pieces

put together, is the members of 50 Blessings laughing at you for asking the purpose and saying, paraphrased “you thought there was a point to this? This was a game you psycho.”” (Jacob Geller) This narrative takes a pause after several levels frequently to put the player in a room with what could be his psyche, all illusive to their motives while judging the player for enjoying what has been the game. It’s a commentary of the violence that we regularly consume on the regular, but with gameplay to desensitize us or even excite us to play more of its addictive gameplay. Dennaton created a game that makes the player question what is there to enjoy about the violence and the blood, while creating a game that is a drug from the moment you press play. Describing the game like a drug is no exaggeration at all, as even years after the game has been released, gamers in the speed running community find themselves continually playing to get a better time for completion of the game. As many people can describe it, “Hotline Miami is practically MEANT to be speedran.” (sn34ky br33ki). The game is addictive, and it’s very ironic how a game that intends the player to think on their actions in gameplay continues to play the game for only its gameplay. Hotline Miami has even influenced an entire genre of music to a generation, the same music to encourage blood splatter has one of the musicians play live to half a million concert goers in Poland during 2019. While its message wasn’t misunderstood, the

game became a style, and it became a fond experience to many gamers worldwide. Its message spoke volumes, but at the same time also became neglected as the game itself after story completion became the very thing to bring some gamers back. Endless nights of murdering and experimentation, with its replay ability being a big factor, Hotline Miami was a success that rivaled huge game giants at the time and will continue to service new and old gamers who find themselves booting it up for years to come. It really says a lot about modern gamers, the very thing it criticizes, to continuously praise a game that is near a decade old, whether one of its songs plays on someone's shuffle, or another speed runner completing it in a shorter time, or just someone reinstalling after a while, it's an addiction that seems to pour itself deep in the minds of people who had the pleasure of giving it a shot a long time ago.

The narrative in Hotline Miami is what wraps the entire experience together, a fun action game with cool style and substance, and a thought-provoking narrative that we could choose to unravel on our own or become like the protagonist; simply forget about it once the credits roll. It's the way we become the protagonist naturally due to the gameplay that really makes it stand out, and the constant euphoria inducing gameplay that creates value in the violence in the game. As well as the contrasting commentary on the very thing we enjoy, especially enhanced due to the adrenaline filled game that seems to glorify it from title screen to the end. Hotline Miami is a great commentary on the use of violence in video games and will be its staple for years to come.

Works Cited

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Geller, Jacob. “I Do Not Understand Hotline Miami 2” *Youtube*, uploaded by Jacob Geller, 15, Oct. 2021, [I Do Not Understand Hotline Miami 2](#)
sn34ky br33ki.” Hotline Miami by Snowfats in 24:42 – AGDQ2020.” *YouTube Comments*, 14 Jan 2020. [Hotline Miami by Snowfats in 24:42 - AGDQ2020](#)

End Level Image:

<https://twitter.com/hotlinemiami/status/745607493234024448>

Message Image:

<https://me.me/i/do-you-like-hurting-other-feople-do-you-like-hurting-097d1303dd304fef8070c7413db5c7b4>

Vomit Image:

<https://steamcommunity.com/sharedfiles/filedetails/?id=323280965>

Jacket’s Room Image:

<https://hotlinemiami.fandom.com/wiki/Jacket>