

The Emptiness of Hardcore: Consuming Violence in *Hotline: Miami*

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Abstract: The article explores the challenges to (media) consumerism posed in the indie action game *Hotline: Miami* (Dennaton Games, 2012). *Hotline* deconstructs not only indulgence associated with violent gaming but also its main nostalgic interest—the cultural era of the 1980s—through a ludification of excess. I will aim to demonstrate this through an analysis of the game’s “procedural rhetoric” (Bogost) and narrative structure. Overwhelming the player’s senses with intense audio-visuals, and explicitly confronting her motivations for participating in extreme violence, the game balances the game experience between a trance-like state of indulgent overexposure and metaleptic commentary. The sensory overload is also sharply contrasted with the level of precision necessary to complete the levels, bending the adrenaline-pumping core of the gameplay towards mechanics more common in stealth-based games. The system of in-game rewards and the overall narrative structure further complicate the purposefulness of player acts, questioning the teleology of gore in gaming and subverting the conventional notion of video game violence as entertainment. As I will argue, the metaludic commentary destabilizes the game through irony, relativizing the player’s commitment to it. In so doing, it makes *Hotline: Miami* a prime example of “dissonant development” (Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter), a game that manages to both sweep the market and challenge its basic premises as an entertainment medium.

Keywords: *Hotline: Miami*, violence, consumption, procedural rhetoric, game narration

Introduction

Ever since the first *Doom* (1993), the discussion of gaming ethics has mostly focused on the sanitization of violence that certain genres utilize in their depictions of war and combat. As the medium of video games has expanded in scope and approaches, the critique has come to manifest mostly in metaludic works, with “serious games” in the vanguard (Flanagan; Bogost), and later on even in commercial first-person shooters such as *Spec-Ops: The Line* (2012), *Bioshock* (2007), or the infamous *Grand Theft Auto* franchise (1997-). The latter three are mentioned as exemplary in Marcus Maloney’s article “Ambivalent Violence in Contemporary Game Design” (2019), in which he examines the (re)contextualization of player aggression through narrative. While the games differ to an extent, they all rely on showing the questionable nature of the player character’s actions and the consequences these actions’ questionability has for the gameworld. The acts of violence are therefore framed as wrong from a moral perspective, which remains confined to the fictional realm; the challenge these games pose to the usual representation of violence in gaming concerns its unrealistic and sanitized representations of aggression. While such depictions certainly represent a valid point about the medium and its numerous dubious exploitations of combat, other, more holistic statements about consuming gaming violence are possible as well. And this, I would argue, is the case with *Hotline: Miami*.

The 2012 game by “Dennaton Games” is a top-down shooter set in a fictionalized, nostalgically stylized version of the 1989 Miami in which the player assumes the role of an unnamed employee of the titular hotline. The player character (PC)¹ receives mysterious tips on his answering machine which serve as the primary narrative framing of the exceptionally bloody and graphic sprees delivered in a retro-neon aesthetic and accompanied by a beat-heavy synthwave soundtrack. Murder gigs are the main process described by the game’s procedural rhetoric (Bogost 9). They are accompanied by the semi-interactive scenes of consumption and prominent paratext in the form of the scoring system. These elements are positioned through a linear but fractured storyline, full of omissions and metaleptic intrusions, and together they form a self-consciously convoluted statement on the emptiness of hardcore gaming violence. *Hotline: Miami* masterfully employs concepts of cultural consumption of the 1980s, as well as a tongue-in-cheek approach to the constructed nature of games and addictive high-skill gameplay, to raise awareness about the very act of media consumption. The game is an outstanding example of “dissonant development” (Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter 194), which takes gaming and consumerism as its primary targets² of dissent. As a post-millennial perspective on the desanitization of violence, *Hotline* adds new layers to exposure—a method of holding viewers accountable, pioneered by film authors such as Sam Peckinpah (Prince)—right to the point where it directly confronts the player about her motivation for participating. *Hotline* strips its action of any in-game sense, to the extent where it becomes clear that player enjoyment is the only element which survives the game’s self-subversions. Ironic destabilizations lay bare the act of consuming the game, and expose the hardcore gaming experience as an empty sign, a form of easy fun which parades its own lack of meaning. However, as I will aim to show in my analysis, such nihilism still remains confrontational, turning *Hotline: Miami* into a poignant critique of the spectacle-oriented media consumption of violence. In order to demonstrate this, I will first analyze the gameplay loop and its rhetoric of gory spectacle. While the action sequences are definitely the game’s centerpiece, destabilizing irony is present already on the level of play, sensitizing the player to self-aware consumption. Secondly, I will examine the game’s elliptic narrative which intentionally fails to meaningfully contextualize player action, further voiding the game of any teleology. Both the representation of action and the story of *Hotline: Miami* subvert themselves to the point of vanishing and confront the player with the violence she commits without any sanitizing filters of purpose.

Interrupting the Trance—Framing the Gameplay Loop

Hotline: Miami introduces itself as a malignant fever dream. Striking neon visuals, rough-edged pixel art, enemies which all but explode in blood—in spite of its captivating sensorial intensity, the game is not very welcoming, which is only

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- 1 While the name “Jacket” has become consensus in the fandom, the protagonist of *Hotline: Miami* is never named in-game, and since my interpretation relies on the self-exposed artificiality of the game, I prefer to use the more technical phrasing.
 - 2 At one point in the game, the developer stand-ins even comment on the amount of money they are making (“Resolution”).

heightened by the angry, somewhat shabby tutorial instructor. In the best manner of a drill sergeant, the instructor delivers the basic controls and mechanisms very rapidly, for he is here to tell the player “how to kill people” (Tutorial). The game introduces its main activity without pomp: the player is here to kill, and to do it as efficiently as possible. The instructor is here to deliver the hows—completely ignoring the whys—while he scolds the player in advance, nagging about how whatever he says, she will just “get ... [herself] killed anyway” (ibid). His aggressiveness is increased by the invasive use of metalepsis—such as mentioning the controls the player needs to press outside of the fictional world—which also introduces the all-encompassing feature of *Hotline*’s narrative: its tendency to constantly break the fourth wall and, in the process, question the player’s motivation through direct address. This pairing of theme and device also extends into the first cut-scene which immediately follows the tutorial, and while further discussion on the topic will follow, for now it is important to note that metalepsis is also present in the game’s ludic prologue, which integrates narrative destabilization into the very fabric of the game’s fast-paced action.

The game-proper begins with the “Phonecalls” (sic) chapter, in which the player character finds himself in his apartment, with new messages on his answering machine. The messages contain cryptic instructions concerning the delivery of cookies. The instructions point the player to a package in front of the apartment which upon examination turns out to contain ominous wording about his “target” (“The Metro”), along with an open threat that the protagonist is being watched. The rapid, brutal action in the subsequent level relies on this narrative context of imposed criminal labor, with the centerpiece notion that the PC is being forced into it, which is only confirmed at the level’s end, when the PC falls to the ground vomiting. This seems like the culmination of the nausea induced by the game’s audio-visual presentation, an actual materialization of its blend of splatter-focused animation, contrast-based palette and beat-heavy synthwave soundtrack. However, the tendency of *Hotline*’s audio-visual style to overwhelm is strongly counterpointed by its gameplay, which requires planning and an enviable degree of awareness and reflex. The player must stay alert throughout this lucid dream and act with caution, since any wrong move can start a chain reaction of mishap in levels which combine stealth mechanics with unforgiving and quick action. The bird’s eye perspective and the necessity to rely on melee combat in order not to attract too much attention force the player into careful preparation, while simultaneously demanding swift and flawless execution, enforced further by the high score mechanic. The game unlocks new weapons and abilities through the scoring system, which tallies not only standard feats such as combos, kills, or time, but also less common categories such as “boldness,” “exposure,” or even “mercy kills.” Another interesting feature is the play style descriptor, which employs qualifications ranging from “coward” to “sadist,” including the rather derogatory category of “generic.” The ludic paratext seemingly endorses violent spectacle. Still, it also exposes the player’s activity in a somewhat confrontational manner, which becomes clearer when other framing devices are taken into account.

The game obviously has a lot to say about the way it wants to be played; but what reasons does it give the player to do so? The game’s procedural representation is based on the gamification of criminal labor which emphasizes the visceral dimension

of murder, and frames it as pure gaming fun. While this remains true for *Hotline*'s ludic core, based on mesmerizing audio-visuals and immersive combat,³ framing devices, such as the small consumer epilogues, subvert the trance induced by the game's displays of violence. The PC seems to be forced into his peculiar employment, and in the short segments that succeed each level he wreaks havoc on the fictional world only to get free pizza, drinks, or rental VHS tapes. The only reward here is the consumption of trash. While this is telling on its own, it becomes even more intriguing when the game is compared to other cultural products concerned with the 1980s consumerism, most notably Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991). Most "Blank Generation" authors have busied themselves with problematic consumption, but Ellis's novel is a particularly useful example, since it pairs a high-ranking corporate executive with "confused consumerism" that translates the whole world, and especially women, into commodities (Annesley 16). As has been noted by Annalee Newitz, the serial killer as type is usually depicted through images of unrestrained consumption (31). However, in *American Psycho* this form of violent excess is openly paired with media proliferation that serves as its stimulant (Annesley 22; Young 29). The novel's protagonist, Patrick Bateman, lives a life of luxury which slips into a boredom-induced killing spree. His alienation serves as a poignant critique of the new types of overstimulating media practices that emerged in the 1980s, namely of marketing and aggressive branding. However, the perspective provided by *Hotline: Miami* is placed much lower down the economic and business ladder, showing a world where fast food replaces fine dining, and a service worker deeply confused about her task. While Ellis's Bateman excels at investment banking, which enables him to expand his consumption almost infinitely, the player character is stuck in a position similar to the one Richard Sennett encountered in a bakery, while doing research on the effect flexible employment has on personhood, with the workers' overall impression being reduced to "I'm not really a baker" (Sennet 70). The protagonist is also "not really" a serial killer. Nor is he a proper mobster hitman. This, in turn, makes him way less glamorous, but also marks his consumption as either counterproductive, as in the vomiting sequence at the end of the first level, or empty, as in the endings of individual levels. It does not matter much if it is chips, pizza, or a piece of media like the movie rental⁴: the PC is never shown enjoying these low-end products and does not appear to benefit from them in any way. If novels like *American Psycho* are obsessed with brands and treat them as signs which blur the boundary between a person and an object, these consumerist markers of value are nowhere to be seen in *Hotline*. Consumerism does not lead to larger-than-

3 Immersive in terms of the gameplay flow. The over-stylized nature of *Hotline* is as far from realism as an action game can afford to be.

4 Or a woman, for that matter. After the PC saves a female character from one of his sites of operation, the game implies that their relationship develops. We see her getting more comfortable in his flat, eventually even sleeping in the same bed as the protagonist. Still, the female character is quickly and inconsequentially killed off, which reveals her to be as disposable as any of the other pseudo-consumables. While it is implied that the PC's final encounter with the Russian mobster is motivated by the female character's murder, the fact is never explicitly stated, and is even further complicated by the possible "it was all a dream" interpretation provided by the pre-hospital storyline. As can be seen from this brief example, *Hotline* is a text that intentionally leaves a lot of room for guesswork and "deep lore," and does not let any line of inquiry flop.

life hybris, at least not on this plane. Such bleak procedural depiction of the work-consumption loop remains important for the game's depiction of emptiness. In this fictional gameworld, there are no grandiose, erotically imbued serial killers wearing Jean Paul Gaultier, just confused hamburger-munching service personnel throwing up in a shady alleyway.

Aside from pointing to the possible social commentary embedded in the game, the voidness of fictionalized work represented in *Hotline* also hints at another good being consumed through the performance of this conspicuous hitman labor: the game itself. The in-game avatar does not seem to be enjoying himself. Yet, with her high scores and new weapon unlocks, the player might, and this manifests on the microlevel of individual episodes through the contrast drawn between the gameplay loop and its gameworld framing.

“You Will Never See the Whole Picture”—Resolution and Acknowledgment

The story of *Hotline: Miami* is told mostly through monologues uttered in the playable environment. The choice of the device is itself very telling, since it additionally shrinks the player's agency in terms of narrative, replacing the more common in-game dialogue, featured in story-driven games, with a sensation that the character is being talked or, more often, yelled at. *Hotline* also distances itself from commonplace video game narration on the level of composition: while easily digestible, the narration is episodic in structure, filled with fragments, red herrings, questions raised and forgotten, as well as all kinds of vague narration, including two conflicting storylines. The first thread follows the PC and his increasingly gruesome tasks for the hotline service, including a murder of a biker character who might be a fellow employee, an escape from a hospital, and a showdown with a vaguely Russian mobster. This arc's cut-up composition also contains dream-like sequences featuring three masked figures who deliver meta-commentary, as well as a wandering shopkeeper, who vaguely alludes to the events in the gameworld connected to the PC's murder spree. The second storyline features the aforementioned biker character as the playable character, and in this sequence of events it is the PC who gets murdered. The other key difference between these two arcs is the new protagonist's active and aggressive attitude towards his employment. He seeks to get to the bottom of the phone calls and can succeed in doing so if the player has been arduously collecting letters scattered over the previous levels. The letters form a password that enables the biker to enter an underground bunker, where it is revealed that a couple of janitors the player has been encountering throughout the game are actually in charge of a secret “patriotic” organization that aims to discredit the “Russo-American coalition” (“Resolution”).

Before concentrating on the contents of this narrative hodgepodge, it is worth pointing out how this convoluted structure relates to the action movie of the 1980s, *Hotline*'s central nostalgic locus. As Harvey Greenberg observes, the “McMovie” of the 1980s had a distinctive combination of narrative elements: loose plot ends, forgotten subplots, inconsistencies, and bare characters paired with iconic gadgets, which were in turn stylistically paired with fast paced, quick edits, and loud music (183-210). These tropes and devices are evident throughout the game, equally spread

across its ludic, textual and audio-visual layers. However, just as is the case with blank fiction, there are key differences between *Hotline: Miami* and the 1980s action cinema it seems inspired by. Firstly, the game misses one of the key components of movies made in the wake of the Reaganite first strike ideology and Cold War polarization: the protagonist's mission for the common good, an unquestionably patriotic utilization of desanitized violence (Greenberg 97). On the contrary, the game is poignantly playful with its teleology, as can be seen not only on the example of its ambivalence towards the PC's criminal activities, but also in more direct ways throughout its narrative.

If the scoring system hints at how the game wants to bring (critical) attention to its ludic component, this tendency is only cemented in the story sequences with three masked figures in a lobby-like room. The figures are introduced into the narrative as soon as the tutorial ends, and their attitude towards the player is immediately confrontational. It seems that the PC has forgotten who he is or does not want to disclose it, which of the two is hard to tell, since he remains silent. The three figures have distinctive attitudes and colors associated with them: the horse mask is light blue and almost friendly, the rooster is yellow and inquisitive, while the owl character is outright aggressive and bright red. In the first encounter, they are all interested in whether the protagonist remembers them, which is equivalent to the structural role of the cutscene as an introductory clip that should set up the story. Aside from this being a somewhat subtle metalepsis which continues the destabilization that has already begun in the tutorial, the conversation also features important remarks made by the horse-masked character:

“Do you really want me to reveal who you are?
Knowing oneself means acknowledging one's actions.
As of lately you've done some terrible things.” (Part I—Phonecalls)

The metaludic implications are only expanded in the next encounter, this time through a series of questions asked by the rooster-mask:

“Do you like hurting other people?
Who are [sic] leaving messages on your answering machine?
Where are you right now?
Why are we having this conversation?” (Part II—Questions)

While it can be argued that the protagonist is deeply involved in these questions and is experiencing not just some form of memory loss but also a general sense of confusion with reference to his actions, from the recipient's standpoint these utterings have a clear intention of breaking the fourth wall. The player is being guided again and again to dissect her play, especially the gore and havoc she wrecks on the fictional world. Does she enjoy it? Does she want to acknowledge her actions? In this aspect, *Hotline's* metaludism is similar to the direct critiques of player compliancy found in *Bioshock* or even in *Spec-Ops: The Line* (Maloney). Still, the game not only questions its procedural rhetoric but also confronts the player with its narrative, urging her to ask the standard questions associated with the very basics of storytelling: “who,” “where,” and even “why.”

As already noted in a profound analysis by Chris Franklin (2012), *Hotline* is peculiarly reluctant to give any answers to these questions. The game effectively sidelines narrative concerns for more than a half of its duration, namely when the player controls the “Jacket” character. Questions are set aside only to be suddenly brought back to the forefront through the biker, who is violently insistent on getting answers. At the end of his bloody breadcrumb trail lies a secret underground facility run by two janitors whom a careful player recognizes from the brief encounters on the sidelines of the previous levels. The final dialogues come in two versions and offer radically different answers to the big question of what has happened. The first conversation advances the game’s focus on metaludic statements by marking the janitors as a tongue-in-cheek self-insertion by the developers. The line between the fictional characters and their creators blurs, as the janitors explain their motivation for founding the organization and therefore initiating the plot as “We were bored—that’s why” (“Resolution”).⁵ In this ending, the story *still* does not matter, as much as it did not matter in the fun, captivating combat sequences which intentionally avoided the story of the first PC, offering only mystifying clues and nods to its existence. The second, “completionist” ending is unlocked only if the player has collected letters hidden throughout the game, and its big revelation is that the janitors are what Franklin terms “stereotypical video game bad guys who want to take over the world.” Their appearance is aimed as a parody of the 1980s conspiratorial tendency in media—the janitors run an underground organization named “50 Blessings,” which, as they explain, is “a foundation for patriots” whose goal is to topple the “Russo-American coalition” (“Resolution”). The latter is a supposed political treaty which is never explained in any more detail, but is framed by the janitors as anti-American, in the very few words they use to refer to it. The game leaves this vague entity unaddressed, as it also does with numerous instances of narrative incoherence and outright plot holes.⁶ For instance, both of the playable characters join the organization at some point, but they obviously do not have any recollection of it. What is more, the characters’ patriotic effort involves fighting the Russian mafia, whose alleged anti-American influence is never explained. While I agree with Franklin that the game is subverting expectations and outright making fun of players who anticipated narrative fulfillment, it is also worth noting how the nostalgic lens hollows the “conspiracy interpretation of problems” associated with the 1980s media and especially with the renewed Cold War anxieties which the first strike ideology produced, regardless of “whether these clandestine threats involved terrorism, serial murder, or hate crimes” (Jenkins 152). The final encounter with the

5 Similarly, they also hint at the game’s indie production, saying “We’re independent, we did it all ourselves” (“Resolution”).

6 While some of these questions are answered in the sequel, they will be disregarded as not directly relevant to the subject matter of the article. There is a curious tendency in some indie games with sequels to over-explain their plots and simultaneously introduce features like level editors, which, in my view, sacrifice the artistic integrity of the original in favor of further ludification and easier consumption. One of the obvious examples is *The Binding of Isaac* by Edmund McMillan, whose initial obscurantism and overall nihilism are neutralized in expansions to the point of explicitly giving the player base the possibility to introduce new elements into Isaac’s imaginary world through modding. *Hotline* does not go to these lengths, but the heaps of plot thrown at the player in *Hotline: Miami 2* illustrate a similar tendency.

janitors dismisses such thinking as nonsense and paranoia, a form of obsessive behavior equivalent to tedious pixel-hunting for clues, only to get a half-baked, unsatisfying, and completely empty resolution. As the player is warned in the final dialogue the first PC has with the rooster-masked character:

“What you do from here on won’t serve any purpose.
You will never see the whole picture...
And it’s all your fault” (Part IV—Connections)

Conclusion

Hotline Miami offers no clear narrative resolution that could gratify its violence. The murders are emptied of any purpose and exist only to be acknowledged for their own gruesomeness. The actions the player has taken are at best empty gestures, at worst an enjoyment procured from executing the fictional Miamians—“They were all scum anyway, weren’t they?,” as one of the janitors puts it (“Resolution”). The pure visceral, audio-visual-ludic glory of the game seems to intentionally dominate the game’s story, which, throughout most of the game, consists of repeated acts of murder and rather pointless consumption. The intricacy of the ludic experience contrasts with the game’s almost random narrative structure, which is additionally relieved of any meaning through disruptive irony and storytelling dead-ends. At the point of the final ending credits, with the biker character driving out of Miami as the player stand-in, the fictional world is neutralized and hollowed out of any sense. What appears to leave a far stronger impression is the hardcore gameplay, which is not substantially questioned. Ludic action is subverted only once, i.e. in the level in which the unarmed PC tries to escape from the hospital. As already mentioned, this singular instance of the player’s helplessness only serves to emphasize how well-crafted and engaging the action sequences are (Franklin).

Hotline: Miami seemingly strips itself of any pretensions to being anything more than a successful consumer good, with a simultaneous wink to the ethereal nature of consumption. It evokes the 1980s media through structures, motifs, and style, but instead of offering a parody, a critique, or even a proper pastiche, it only “reinvents the feel and shape of characteristic art objects of an older period” in the manner Fredric Jameson associates with consumerist nostalgia (8). Not only does the game render the Red Scare as a mere mechanism of obsessive thinking but it also inverts the craze for luxurious consumption that is said to shape the characters of “blank fiction:” both the scare and the craze are imitated in structure but saved of overt criticism. The game undermines an entire range of possible interpretations, downplaying its own aspects, with the sole exception being the act of consuming *Hotline: Miami* through the challenging and satisfying gameplay. Only the metaludic survives the emptying out of meaning, leaving a gleaming shell of excessive gameplay that not only questions its own displays of violence, but exposes videogame play as an act of media consumption. The sensory overload and smooth gamefeel triumph over meaning. The triumph, in turn, corresponds to the game’s exploration of the relation between murder and consumption, making a statement about the seductive, enjoyable, but intrinsically empty nature of carrying out gamified hardcore violence.

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