

Hailey Sheppard

Gdd-201

Professor Bertozzi

12/5/2024

How The Telling of a Non-Linear Story Affects Player Experience

Zero Escape: Zero Time Dilemma is a game about nine people getting put into teams of 3 to survive a death game in which only three players can survive. This game is directed by Kotaro Uchikoshi and is filled with his out-of-the-box storytelling techniques. The game takes on a sort of scene-by-scene format in which the player can choose one team to view a scene in. Each of these scenes takes place in an order not initially known to the player. Through doing this Uchikoshi is able to create an environment in which the player never truly knows what has and has not happened in the story. Though this may sound intriguing, the game does not do a good job of utilizing this effect. Writing a non-linear storyline in the media of videogames is very hard to do well, in this paper I shall discuss how the design team for *Zero Time Dilemma* handled this task and if they truly achieved an experience that left players feeling the narrative wrapped everything up in a complete way.

The narrative is provided to the players in the form of “fragments” that they can play with the intent of creating a compelling environment for the player to explore. Each fragment takes place in its own story and at the end of each fragment the characters are injected with a serum

that makes them forget the past fragment, thus giving players the illusion of a non-linear narrative. Figure 1 shows how these fragments are laid out, this is the fragment for “C-Team”, the other teams’ fragment selects look the same as this.



Figure 1

This layout visually shows the player that this story is fragmented into different sections. This fragmented layout is able to visually complete its job. Players are now supposed to take in the narrative from these fragments and force their brains to figure out the order of events. The issue with this method of narrative comes with the fact that players are essentially being tricked by the game developers. Though this “trick” is essential to non-linear storytelling many players disagreed with this specific use of it. One Ssaberwolf on Metacritic wrote “The non-linearity of the pilot's delivery system squandered any dramatic tension created through plot developments”. This issue stems from the fact that the players never know what has really happened so far in the story, events happen but then in the next fragment they are not brought up or not true in that timeline. One example of this happens during Q-End 1. In this ending we find out that 5 other people have been killed, which has revealed 5/6 of the keywords the characters can use to escape the building they have been trapped in. To get another keyword the characters the players all

enter a standoff in which each of them has a weapon pointed at the other since keywords are only revealed after a character has died. In this standoff when you choose to shoot Eric you are able to kill him and get another keyword. After this you, playing as Q, are able to find out that the other member of Q-team, Mira, is a serial killer. After you get this information when you go back to other fragments nothing changes with the new knowledge you have gained. I feel as though this is a big, missed opportunity in the game. Being able to use all knowledge you have gained from previous timelines would make the narrative they chose to use make sense but instead they only have a few moments the characters can remember happening in previous timelines.

Non-linear stories require much more audience attention than the average storyline. It is up to the player to discern the order of events if they so desire. This does add to many of the ideas that *Zero Time Dilemma* explores such as: choice and the psychological toll that traveling through time and parallel realities has. In doing this the game is challenging storytelling conventions which could be the reason that some players dislike this choice, many people are not fond of the irregular, like SSSaberwolf was saying before. Though in having this mechanic, players are rewarded with getting new pieces of the puzzle that are being laid out across different realities. Forcing players to revisit past scenarios with newfound knowledge they gained from other fragments. This also forces players to consider their choices with greater caution, they never know what will affect the greater timeline. This allows players to connect more with what is happening in the game, they are given a direct say on how the course of the story will go. And this is especially relevant because of the choices offered in the game. Pictured in Figure 2 is one of those choices.



Figure 2

In this choice you choose to essentially play a game of Russian roulette with one character and in doing so another character will be able to survive. This is just one example of how these important these choices tend to be. Players must confront the paradox of causality and the burden that comes with the knowledge of potential outcomes that will come from each decision they make, which in theory should make the game feel more impactful.

Linear narratives often feature an unreliable narrator, as characters lack access to all the information that the audience possesses, leading to actions that can seem misguided or inconsistent. This raises the question of “whether the narration presents a view on narrative information that is trustworthy and consistent, or whether the narrative events are misleadingly presented,” (Buckland 95). In the case of *Zero Time Dilemma*, the consistency of information is minimal, with many events intentionally designed to mislead players. This can lead to frustration, as players may struggle to navigate the complexities of the plot. While most players should recognize the unreliability of the narration fairly quickly, some may remain unaware or confused about certain story elements, resulting in a disconnect between their expectations and

the game's intricate storytelling approach. Some may even argue that the approach the *Zero Time Dilemma* takes is closer antenarrative approach. An antenarrative approach is defined as being “in the middle” and “in-between” (Boje, 2001a, p. 293), refusing to attach beginnings and endings needed to achieve narrative closure as required” (Boje 38). Many could view *Zero Time Dilemma* as falling under this definition. In this game there are multiple endings, so it essentially up to the player to decide which one closes the narrative. Pictured in Figure 3 are the

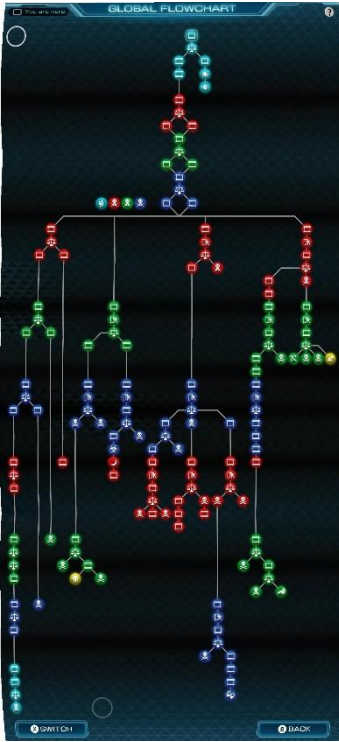


Figure 3

main available endings you can get in game. All the endings you can get are relevant to the over arching timeline. Some endings are locked until you achieve a different ending. The game does not do a good job of informing you how to unlock endings. Players are tasked with figuring that out on their own. Sometimes this can make the story very confusing. When I first played the game, I was able to find a secret ending accidentally which spoiled the true ending of the game. To get this ending I wrote a name of a character's son that I had learned in a prior fragment as the person who was responsible for another character's death. I only chose to write his name as a joke not thinking that he was actually responsible. After I wrote that the player realized that the son was the

person who put everyone in the death game, so they technically were responsible. This made the actual villain reveal very boring for me since I already figured it out through pure coincidence.

Figure 4



Another weak point of *Zero Time Dilemma* is that the game gives you the actual narrative structure, even though the game is laid out like it is a non-linear sequence of events. This makes the use of the non-linear narrative feel less important. It does not force the player to figure out the structure of events themselves. This function would be okay if it was something you could only see when you have beaten the game, but this function is available right away, thus destroying the significance of the narrative. Figure 4 shows how the game has laid out the sequence of events. The use of the flowchart is most likely because of the fact that the previous Zero Escape games use the same format. But in the specific case of the narrative of this game it makes the concept worse.

Zero Time Dilemma is a game about human nature and condition and how people react in complex situations. It does so through its non-linear narrative that allows players to take in the story through separated fragments. Overall, the non-linear narrative of *Zero Time Dilemma* left certain players, like myself, feeling like there were a lot of confusing choices and missed opportunities on the development team's part. With further work on the development team's part, they would be able to fix the issues that occur within the story of *Zero Time Dilemma*.

Sources:

Breaking out of Narrative's Prison: Improper Story in Storytelling Organization

David M. Boje <https://www.jstor.org/journal/storselfsoci>

<https://www.metacritic.com/game/zero-escape-zero-time-dilemma/>

Narrative and Narration: Analyzing Cinematic Storytelling (warren buckland)

https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/buck18143.11?searchText=&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3Dnon%2Blinear%26so%3Drel&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&searchKey=&refreqid=fastly-default%3Aaa2e1287f23e837642f02d805dece71b&seq=1