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Advanced Composition

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Video Game: *Until Dawn*
Developer: Supermassive, 2015
Rated: M
10 hrs. Horror/Interactive Cinema
PlayStation 4
\$59.99

RUNNING OUT OF TIME: A REVIEW OF SUPERMASSIVE'S NEW SURVIVAL HORROR GAME, *UNTIL DAWN*.



Figure 1: *Until Dawn* cover image

Report Card		
NAME	EVALUATED BY	
Until Dawn	Sam Campbell	
Subject	Grade	Comments
Concept	A	
Characters	A	
Graphics	B	
Gameplay	A	
Overall	A-	
Grading Scale		
A-	C-	
B-	D-	

On August 25, 2015 one of the biggest cinematic events of the year was released: *Until Dawn*. The midnight release lured many out of their beds so they could wait in lines across the country just to be some of the first people able to experience it firsthand. *Until Dawn* is a simple, kitschy story about eight teenage friends who are vacationing in a remote cabin: Sam, Ashley, Emily, Josh, Hannah,

Beth, Mike, and Chris. The cabin that they are vacationing at, as well as the entire mountain, belongs to Josh, Hannah, and Beth's parents. This winter getaway is a celebration for Hannah's birthday. Emily, who is dating Mike, finds Hannah's diary and learns that Hannah has a crush on Mike. This makes Emily angry and she decides that she is going to play a trick on Hannah. She includes everyone except Hannah's brother and sister. They have Mike write a fake love note to Hannah and wait for her in an upstairs bedroom.

They then hide and record what happens. Hannah comes to meet Mike and begins to take off her shirt

when she hears giggling and Emily comes out from hiding to tell her that she never had a chance with Mike. Hannah, sobbing, runs out of the house into the forest. Beth is the only one who runs after her. They are never seen again. The following year, Josh invites his friends back to the cabin to try and put the past behind them. He mourns the loss of his sisters but he hopes that a weekend getaway with his friends will help him finally move on. Although some are skeptical about returning to the cabin, they agree in order to help their friend. Not long after they arrive, however, they realize that someone—or something—is on the mountain with them, and wants them dead. Because of the terrible snowstorm, it is impossible for rescuers to reach them before 7 a.m. So, just like the title says, the teenagers will have to survive the night and stay alive until dawn.



Figure 2: A missing poster of Hannah Washington

So what makes this horror movie different than the hundreds of others with equally cliché plotlines? For starters, it's a video game not a movie. And what is better than watching a horror flick? Living through one.

Concept:



Figure 3: The butterfly effect explained in *Until Dawn's* opening credits.

For many, including myself, it is the concept that draws us to playing *Until Dawn*. The entire game is based on what is commonly referred to as the butterfly effect. This is the theory that even the tiniest actions can cause a chain reaction that could lead to another, momentous action. For example, a butterfly flapping its wings can cause a hurricane months later. This theory is not new, as it has been explored in many areas of entertainment, including movies—such as the box-office disappointment, *The Butterfly Effect*—and even literature. One of Ray Bradbury's most notable short stories "A Sound of Thunder" is completely based upon the butterfly effect.

In the game *Until Dawn*, the butterfly effect is explained in detail during the opening credits. Players are shown an image of a butterfly, and are shown various veins within the butterfly's wings that branch off and lead in different directions. Players are told that every decision will alter the course of events until the game is through and they are left with one totally unique ending that was individualized by their personal choices throughout the game. For many, this is what draws them to play the game in the first place.

Beyond this idea of the butterfly effect, there is another concept at work in this game. If you have never heard of a video game genre called 'interactive cinema,' then you probably aren't alone. The genre is a new one. French developing company Quantic Dream has attempted to bring this genre to life ever since their release of *Indigo Prophecy* for the Xbox in 2005. *Indigo Prophecy* had an amazing storyline, allowed players to make a few choices throughout the game as to what to say and do, and also had two possible outcomes in the end. Although the game did not garner the positive reviews that developers had hoped, it definitely created a framework for future games in the interactive cinema genre. Quantic Dream went back to the drawing board, keeping in mind the pros and cons of their first interactive cinema game and in 2010 they released *Heavy Rain* for the PlayStation 3. *Heavy Rain* was much more of a success. With many more opportunities for players to alter the ending, and with a total of 20 different endings available, *Heavy Rain* brought to light a never-before-seen need in the gaming industry. Gamers need to feel as though they are in control. They like it when they know that what they do matters. And if the storyline is good enough, players will get sucked into the game world and have a hard time coming back up for air.

It wasn't long until someone else caught on. Supermassive Games, founded in 2008 and responsible for the highly addictive party game *LittleBigPlanet*, released the newest interactive cinema game on the market, *Until Dawn*, and has subsequently set the bar so high that other developers are going to have a rough time catching up with them.

With a rumored possibility of over 100 different endings, and the opportunity to make a decision every few minutes, *Until Dawn* takes this newborn genre and catapults it into adolescence.



Indigo Prophecy
(Xbox)
2005

eline of the Interactive Cinema Genre

Heavy Rain (PS3)
2000



Until Dawn (PS4)
2015



Cast/Characters:



Figure 7: The real life cast of *Until Dawn* juxtaposed with their animated characters. Not shown: Ashley and Matt

However, a video game cannot survive on concept alone. And while the idea of the butterfly effect and my already established love of the interactive cinema genre was enough to intrigue me into playing, it would not have been enough to keep me playing. I have too many other things that are waiting to grab my attention. The game needed something else to keep me from putting the controller down and working on my homework.

This ‘thing’ was the characters.

There are eight playable characters in *Until Dawn*. These consist of four boys and four girls, five White Caucasians, one African American, and one Asian American. Each character was played by a professional actor who acted through the entire video game as though it was a movie, and also played the voice actors of their characters. The girls are Sam, Jessica, Emily, and Ashley (not pictured above; played by Galadriel Stineman). The boys are Josh, Mike, Chris, and Matt (not pictured above; played by Jordan Fisher). Matt is the African American and Emily is the Asian American.

The most appealing thing about the characters was that they were almost like real people. Some of them I love from the beginning, like Sam, Chris, and Ashley. Some of them I didn't like at all, like Emily and Matt. Some of them I didn't like until I got to know them better, like Mike and Jessica, but after that you fall in love with them. You get to know the characters throughout the game just like you'd get to know your own friends until you are so engrossed in their love lives, their rivalries, their loyalties, and betrayals that you are physically and emotionally torn when faced with a choice that could potentially hurt one of the characters. These human qualities that the game has is what really elevates the game to a higher level than other games on the market.



Figure 8: Several of the friends talking outside of the cabin.

Graphics:



Figure 9: Mike and Jessica playing in the snow.

Video game companies are constantly working to one-up each other, especially in the realm of graphics. Generally, they do a good job of making pretty things look pretty and dark things look dark. But if you're like me, graphics have never really mattered to you. Honestly, I really didn't care whether I was seeing a 2D sidescroller or a 3D open sandbox world.

All of that changed when I began playing *Until Dawn*.

The graphics of this game are amazing, as seen by how realistic the characters are in the above photos. The developers used skin-graphing technology in order for the movements and facial expressions of the characters to seem more realistic and natural. This worked beautifully. The animated characters couldn't look any more like their real life counterparts than they already do. And there are times during gameplay cut scenes that look so much like live actors in a movie that they almost make you forget momentarily that you are, in fact, playing an animated game. No detail was too small to

look over. Every single strand of hair is visible, every line and wrinkle that would crease a human's real face appears when characters are smiling or crying. Even during scenes filled with tension and adrenaline you are tempted to stop and enjoy the sublimity of the scene: the white moonlight filtering through the window and just barely illuminating the demonic clown in the corner of the room whilst the candles flicker around the bathtub



Figure 10: The "stranger" who carries a flamethrower.

your character is soaking in—each bubble floating whimsically on the water. There are other times, too, when your character is walking through the forest and each and every individual snowflake that falls is in crystal clarity, as with every individual needle of the evergreen trees that surround them. Or, when standing in the brightly lit kitchen you can zoom in on your character and see each piece of lint that happens

to be on their fuzzy sweatshirt. Never before have I experienced gameplay that so blurred the lines between animation and cinema.

That being said, it is understandable that such a level of perfection is difficult to maintain. However, this means that when something didn't graphically meet the expectations players come to have for the game, it is not only noticeable but it sticks out severely. There were only a few times that this happened, and it was only during times when the game was attempting to appeal to those who require gore to be in their horror movies. While this wouldn't be a problem for players who manage to save the lives of all the characters, it is a problem for those of us who have sat through the deaths of these

teenagers. Some of them can potentially die in very extreme ways. For example, during my first playing of the game there was a scene where Chris, Josh, and Ashley get into an argument after playing with a Quiji board. The Quiji board had supposedly channeled Josh's sister Hannah (one of the two girls who had went missing the year before). Josh accuses Ashley of playing a trick on him. Then, they are attacked by the clown and knocked out. When Chris wakes up, he goes in search of them, following a trail of blood all the way outside the cabin to a workshop in the woods. In front of the workshop he finds a pig's head on a stake in the ground, *The Lord of the Flies* style. When Chris goes into the workshop, he finds Ashley and Josh tied to a wall in front of a saw. A voice tells him via an overhead speaker that he has thirty seconds to choose which one of them he wants to save or else they'll both die. I chose to have Chris save Ashley, hereby sentencing Josh to death by being sawn in half.

This was my first rendezvous with gore in *Until Dawn*, and I was forced to have to paused the game—not because I was so thoroughly grossed out by the innards that flooded out of his gut—but because of the fact that while I could see each individual fleck of rust that had settled on the saw-blade, the guts and gore looked more like sausage links and SPAM. I was highly disappointed with the lack of effort to make the actual gore scenes realistic.

Another point in the game that was graphically lacking was the Wendigo deaths. If you play the game a certain way you can trigger a plotline that has supernatural elements beyond the normal teen slasher story. In this storyline, there are creatures called Wendigoes that roam the forests around the cabin. If you make a wrong move, the Wendigo will kill your character instantly. According to the storyline, they are supposed

to do this by first rendering your character immobile, then peeling off their skin, and finally keeping your character alive while feasting on their organs, which of course will end in a slow, very painful death. However, during actual gameplay every Wendigo death that I personally triggered all ended the same: With my characters' being beheaded:



Figure 11: One of Ashley's possible deaths--when a Wendigo beheads her.

If I'm being honest, the first time it happened was pretty cool. I was stunned, and the graphics didn't completely fail. But the next two deaths by Wendigo decapitation bordered on comical (See Figure 7). Not only did I know it was coming, but it looked as though pulling a human head off of its body was as easy as popping the head off of a Barbie doll. And it would be a clean pull too. Sure, a little blood splattered on the floor, but no ligaments or muscles dangled from the disembodied head, no ripped skin along the edges. It was just too clean, too neat, too *easy*. Throughout the entire game, the writers do a great job at layering multiple subgenres of horror stories together so that their survival horror video game would appeal to many people. They include it all: the basic teen slasher story; the torture porn; the gore; the *Saw*-esque type of forced self-harm. They even do a great job at blending in aspects of psychological thrillers. However, during some of these Wendigo death scenes, it's almost as though they tried too hard.

Personally, it would've been much more effective if, such as in the scene above of Ashley's beheading, they would have just left the head out of the image and showed just her hand falling limp on the bloody ground. There's something to say for leaving things to the imagination—sometimes a single drop of blood is more terrifying than an entire pool of it.

Gameplay:

Gameplay is one of the most important elements of a video game, obviously. How a game interacts with the players can determine whether or not a gamer is going to continue playing, or set down the controller. There is a fine line that must be walked between easy and difficult. Have controls that are too complicated and confusing and players will soon become too frustrated to continue playing. Have controls that are too simplistic and easy and players will quickly become bored.

Until Dawn does a great job at balancing simplicity and difficulty. The controls themselves are very simple. You use the joystick to walk around, and the X button to interact with objects. Some items you pick up give you clues as to what happened in the past, or what might happen in the future.



Figure 12: Chris finds a totem that shows him a glimpse into the future.

The items that tell you what might happen are not always 100% accurate, of course. The future changes depending on the choices that the player makes. There are many times throughout the game that players are faced with decisions. During these times, players must choose what to do within 30 seconds or less. Players make this decision by moving the joystick either to the left or right, depending on which choice is being made. One thing that is difficult to remember in times of high tension is that the player always has the option to do nothing. The choices that the players make can be seemingly small decisions—such as to snoop through someone’s backpack or leave it alone—or they can be monumental, such as to save one person’s life over another’s’.



Figure 13: Chris must make a choice between saving Josh or Ashley.

After a decision is made, it triggers the butterfly effect, and the rest of the game is altered by whatever decision the player made at this time. In the above screenshot, Chris has to choose whether or not to save the life of his best friend Josh, or the girl that he is

secretly in love with, Ashley. Whomever he doesn't choose to save faces death by being sawn in half in this scene.

Other times in the game, players find themselves in time-crunch situations, whether they are racing to save someone's life, or racing to escape imminent death. Those situations often involve making decisions such as "Hide" or "Run" within 10 seconds or less. These sudden decision making times are interspersed with quick time events. For those who are unfamiliar with what QTEs are, they are fast paced events that require players to press a particular button on the controller at a specific time. For example, if your character is running away from the insane clown, you would have to press the triangle button in order to have Sam jump over the bed, then you would have to press the square button in order to have her shut the door behind her. Then, a decision would pop up and you would have to choose whether to keep running or hide. If you keep running, you could make a wrong turn and meet back up with the killer. If you hide, you could be found by the killer. Either choice could kill you. Either choice could save you. But the important part is, the choice is all yours.



Figure 14: Sam running from the clown.

Final Score: A-

I have played many, many games throughout my lifetime, and none of them quite compare to *Until Dawn*. I played this game a few times on my best friend's PlayStation 4, and it was enough to make me run out to the nearest electronics store and buy both the system and the game for myself, just so I could get a few more hours of gameplay. This game is the complete package, which is honestly surprising for someone such as myself to say since I am

absolutely not a fan of horror movies, and I definitely do not like to be scared. But the game's use of the butterfly effect was



enough to reel me in, [Figure 15: Jess, after surviving a Wendigo attack.](#)

and paired with the fact that it was being compared to *Heavy Rain* (which was my favorite game prior to playing *Until Dawn*) I had to at least try the game. I was not disappointed.

The reason that I give *Until Dawn* an A- instead of an A+ is because my issue with the graphics during certain parts of the game caused me to take a few points away. However, regardless of that, the game is amazing and it deserves to be played by anyone who likes video games. The controls are easy to learn for anyone. The storyline is well-written, intriguing, and original even despite its' cliché setup. The graphics are beautiful. The characters are fun and realistic—they will most likely remind you of your friends.

The game is scary enough to satisfy even the most hardcore horror fan, but it isn't so scary that it should deter someone who isn't a fan of the genre. I hate horror and I did not have nightmares after playing it. So my advice for anyone planning on playing the game is this: Start at around 7 pm, and make sure you have nothing to do for the next ten hours. Then grab the game, turn off the lights, and settle in.

Surviving until dawn is one hell of a ride.



Figure 16: The last scene, and the characters that survived until dawn.