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Until Dawn offers genuine thrills, chills
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By John Powell - G4 Canada

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As a life-long horror fan, even I am waving the white flag at this point. Please, no more supernatural beings. No more ghosts, apparitions, phantoms, spectres, poltergeists or wraiths. Stop overdosing us with North America's version of Japanese horror. No matter how well it is done, it still isn't the same and never will be.

As it happens, someone must be hearing my pleas. With the current Scream TV series, the upcoming Scream Queens and Friday 13th television shows, it appears that the slasher genre, one of my favourites, is finally making a killer comeback. Horror icons such as Jason, Freddy, The Shape, Ghostface and others are making returns not just on the small screen but the digital screen as well with their inclusions in such games as Mortal Kombat and the like.

While the trend is reassuring, nothing beats experiencing all of the chills and thrills of a claustrophobic, spooky environment where danger could lurk around each and every dark corner. Like last year's Alien Isolation, Until Dawn captures all the trademarks of its genre so very perfectly. Horror fans, specifically slasher movie fans, this is THE game for you.

Like all good slasher or Giallo movies, Until Dawn is about more than guts and gore. There is a mystery at the centre of all the fear and loathing. Until Dawn's story won't fool veteran fans based on the hints that are dropped throughout the game and especially if you know your horror movie plots, but the unexpected left hand turn later on is very, very jarring. It doesn't ruin the experience by any means, it just puts the story on a different path that is just not as gratifying.

In the manner of Evil Dead and Friday 13th, Until Dawn does a great job of isolating its victims. During the winter, a group of friends reunite at a hinterland cabin at the behest of their mutual pal: Josh (voiced by Mr. Robot's Rami Malek). All of the stereotypical characters are present and accounted for. There's the awkward nerd, the bitchy entitled brat, the he-man hero, the sporty girl and the creepy loner. Their dialogue and reactions are very genuine. It helps that Melek is not the only recognizable star making an appearance either. There's Hayden Panettiere from Heroes, Brett Dalton (Grant Ward from Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.), Nichole Bloom from Shameless, Galadriel Stineman (Gwen Tennyson in Ben 10: Alien Swarm), Noah Fleiss (Josh and S.A.M.) and Meaghan Martin from Camp Rock.

Josh, himself, is a bit of a frantic, manic oddball who wants nothing more than everyone to party like "porn stars" but also honour the deaths of his twin sisters: Hannah and Beth. Red flags from Prom Night and Carrie are raised when we witness how the sisters died, as the result, sorta, kinda, of a prank gone horribly wrong by Josh's friends. Before you can say "Don't go out alone!", weird things start happening, characters are isolated for one reason or another and the really, really gruesome body count begins.

Interspersed throughout the story are bizarre therapy sessions between who we assume is the killer and their shrink, the creepy Dr. Hill, voiced with sinister glee by Peter Stormare. It is a shame this scenario isn't explored more and is kinda left hanging when all of the plot threads come together.

The really great thing about Until Dawn is that like some gruesome Choose Your Own Adventure, you bounce around from player to player and the decisions you make ultimately decide their fate, the fate of others and the course of the story. The producers, developers call this the "The Butterfly Effect". If you decide to keep a weapon for yourself, another character might be left defenceless when they face a life or death situation. If you elect to save one person over another or keep secrets from one character, your judgement calls can have positive or negative effects on future events. The mechanic itself does function well even though most of the time there is no way to logically predict the outcome of your choices.



Although you will walk around, collect clues and interact with the environment, there are a ton of action sequences requiring you to attack, shoot and execute quick time events and make rapid fire decisions without a moment's notice. Because they come without warning, the quick time events can be easy to flub. One of the cooler mechanics that plays into the eerie atmosphere is you are required at times to hold the controller absolutely still as danger lurks nearby. Not only does this crank up the tension but it intensifies the anxiety as you wait stock still for the crises to pass.

Sometimes the best course of action is to make no choice at all. Refusing to shoot a wild animal or pick who lives or dies can work out well. Having that option adds another aspect to the whole Butterfly Effect mechanic.

Fair or not, it is difficult to go back and undo what you have done in Until Dawn. You can go back and replay segments when you have beaten the game but until then, you are stuck with the consequences of your choices. A word of warning: Search entire areas for clues before ever moving on. There are times when you move into a new area or certain events are triggered that then prevent you from returning whence you came. It is the game's biggest and perhaps only serious flaw.



Although the shocking jumps scares are really expertly timed and are guaranteed to have you fumbling your controller often, they are not what makes Until Dawn so scary. Like any great horror movie, it is the calculated storytelling and the ominous setting. Supermassive Games certainly did their homework in making Until Dawn a heart-felt bloody valentine to the horror and slasher film genre.

Whether it be The Revenge, A New Beginning, The Son Of, The Curse or The Return, we hope Until Dawn gets the sequel it and its fans deserve.



Until Dawn
Format: *Playstation 4*
Publisher: *Sony Computer Entertainment*
Developer: *Supermassive Games*
ESRB Rating: *M for Mature*
Official Site: <https://www.playstation.com/en-us/games/until-dawn-ps4/>
Rating: 9 / 10

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