Media Review

Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: A Maligned Video Game Masterpiece

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With innumerable adaptations, *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) by Robert Louis Stevenson endures as a cornerstone of the Victorian Gothic literary canon. Adapting the complexities and nuances of Jekyll's troubling scientific discovery and consequent double-life is no easy feat. While film and stage productions have historically functioned as popular and accessible vehicles for creative adaptation, the viewer is sorely limited by their role as a spectator. However, there exists one medium that encourages active participation from its audience—electronic video games. 1988's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, developed by Advanced Communication, Co. and published by Toho, is a rarity, being one of relatively few games inspired by the novella.

Although most adaptations of Stevenson's novella have been met with mixed reception, this particular title on the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) has garnered infamy among retro gamers as an unplayable trainwreck, often cited as one of the worst video games ever conceived. The general consensus is that, while the game attempts to translate the essence of the story into an interactive format, it falls short in several key areas. Common criticism stems from how the game's central mechanics fail to capture the rich themes and moral ambiguity present in Stevenson's work. Notoriously unforgiving difficulty also leads gamers to abandon the title altogether out of frustration, bolstering its reputation. Yet, upon further analysis, I vehemently disagree with its detractors—in fact, I consider the game to be a much-maligned masterpiece. While evidently flawed, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* cleverly experiments with duality as a gaming concept, critiquing violent aspects of player behavior that have been traditionally "rewarded" in the context of the medium—Konami's classic run-and-gun, *Contra* (1987), springs to mind. *Dr. Jekyll and Mr.*

Hyde's structure inadvertently critiques violence and power fantasies while its jarring transitions between two characters highlight the instability of player control and identification.

Before unraveling the game from an analytic and philosophical view, it is imperative to understand the overall premise of this adaptation, its general mechanics, and initial takeaways. With over one hundred years between the publication of the novella and the development of the game, changes are immediately apparent. The original instruction manual offers the player with a rough preface of the story:

> Dr. Jekyll has been researching the human mind, and has found that it contains two opposite elements: Good and Evil. After years of experimentation, Dr. Jekyll succeeds in creating a potion which separates these two elements of the personality—and decides to test the potion on himself! When he does, the normally kind and intelligent Dr. Jekyll is transformed into the brutal and savage Mr. Hyde. The good Dr. Jekyll soon has difficulty controlling his transformations into the evil Mr. Hyde, and he finds that the two sides of his personality are in conflict for control of his mind. (2)

This rough summation is serviceable, but admittedly at odds with its source material. The novella makes the case that Jekyll is not solely righteous, though Mr. Hyde is undoubtedly wicked. Stevenson establishes this early in the novella when Enfield recounts his walk home "from some place at the end of the world" at three in the morning to his cousin, Utterson. He notes "a little man who was stumping along eastward at a good walk" and "a girl of maybe eight or ten who was running as hard as she was able down a cross street." As the two of them violently collide, Enfield recalls, "the horrible part of the thing; for the man trampled calmly over the child's body and left her screaming on the ground" (Stevenson 7). In the aftermath, Enfield forces Hyde to pay one hundred pounds to avoid a scandal, which is done through a check signed by the reputable Dr.

Jekyll, Utterson's client. Although Jekyll does not violently trample the little girl, his association with Hyde and refusal to completely disavow him despite his cruelty suggests a moral ambiguity. Utterson is convinced that Jekyll is a victim of blackmail, masking the reality that his reluctance to sever ties with Hyde implies a darker, impure aspect to his character. Jekyll's continual embrace of the effects of his serum reaches a point of no return when he begins to metamorphose into Hyde without consciously drinking it:

> I had gone to bed Henry Jekyll, I had awakened Edward Hyde. How was this to be explained? I asked myself; and then, with another bound of terror—how was it to be remedied? It was well on in the morning; the servants were up; all my drugs were in the cabinet. (68)

Jekyll recounts the horrific and uncontrollable process of transforming into Hyde, though he foolishly continues experimenting with it, suggesting a willingness to explore and indulge in evil. His appearance, "pale and dwarfish" and distinct in the way "he gave an impression of deformity without any nameable malformation" (18) indicates Jekyll's fragile moral integrity, as he knowingly engages in activities that result in Hyde's release. His grotesque appearance and bizarre mannerisms mirror his morality, reinforcing a fascination with physiognomy at the time, supported by Utterson's remark that "if ever I read Satan's signature upon a face, it is on that of your new friend" (18). Hyde is the embodiment of wickedness and impulsiveness who continues to grow in stature and influence as Jekyll willingly embraces him, functioning on primal emotions, bereft of the reasonability associated with his counterpart.

The manual proceeds to outline the central characters within the video game; however, all of them appear to be creative additions, primarily serving as obstacles. There's Billy Pones, a slingshot sniper who has a crush on Dr. Jekyll's fiancée; The Bomb Maniac, a mysterious man

who pops up everywhere to create explosions; Elena McCowen, a tone-deaf singer whose music notes are quite literally harmful; Rosette Ranright, the only daughter of Dr. Jekyll's friend, Lord Ranright; Arnold Ebetts, a hunting maniac who always carries his rifle around and shoots haphazardly; Jan, a strange old man who can be found digging holes in the street and shoveling the dirt onto passers-by; and Rachel, a beautiful widow who pines for Dr. Jekyll because he resembles her late husband. These figures serve as central enemies within the NES adaptation, all of whom disrupt the player's progress. Although outlined as singular characters, they make numerous appearances within the same level. There are notable omissions from the novella, including Gabriel Utterson, Richard Enfield, Dr. Hastie Lanyon, and Mr. Poole. As this list of names makes clear, there is only a loose connection to Stevenson's original characters. According to the official manual for the game: "Dr. Jekyll is in a merry mood as he leaves his house on a fine London morning—the day he is going to marry his fiancee, the beautiful Miss Millicent. Dr. Jekyll's only goal is to get to church on time!" (5). Miss Millicent happens to be the daughter of Sir *George* Carew, who is known as Sir *Danvers* Carew in the original novella, and one of Hyde's victims. She was originally introduced in the 1920 film adaptation of the novella.

Unfortunately, the daylit journey through London's streets with which the game begins is perilous for our protagonist, whose only armament is a cane; navigating from left to right, several townspeople, animals, and obstacles obstruct his path. Contrary to most 2D platformers, Jekyll's attacks are ineffectual. His primary means of defense is avoiding confrontation. As Jekyll sustains damage, his life meter depletes and his anger meter fills. Once the meter is completely filled, Jekyll is overwhelmed by stress and transforms into Hyde. Here, the gameplay shifts drastically. Hyde navigates a demon-infested inversion of London at night. In fact, the level design is a mirror image of Jekyll's level as the player now autoscrolls from right to left. The manual explicitly claims that

"This contrast between the worlds of Good and Evil is one of the most important features of this game" (3). While fists function as a suitable means of offense, Hyde has a unique ability known as the "Psycho Wave," a feature proudly advertised on the game's packaging. This curved projectile, which "flies through the air in a curved path" and returns "like a boomerang" (12), is easily the most efficient means to dispose of foes. As Hyde plows through an arrangement of growingly diabolical fiends, his anger abates and Jekyll resumes consciousness with roughly seventy percent of his life replenished. A distinguishing, and admittedly fascinating conditional gameplay mechanic, is that if Hyde advances to the equivalent position Jekyll reached in London, "the Powers That Be will intervene and shoot a thunderbolt down from the sky to eliminate Jekyll and Hyde, and the game will be over!" (5). While this may seem confusing, the objective of the game can be summarized as follows: Advance as far as possible as Jekyll and transform back from Hyde swiftly in order to reach the church, marry your beloved, and have good triumph over evil.

Having described the general gameplay, I will now argue that a methodical dissection of the title leads me to conclude this game deserves reputational redemption. Its notorious level design, cryptic objectives, and arbitrary obstacles parallel the confounding and tragic transformations in Stevenson's novella. I consider the game to exist in a separate timeline from the novella—one in which Jekyll fights tooth and nail for redemption and a happy ending as he overcomes the tumultuous force within him. Two of the most echoed complaints toward the game is that Jekyll's movement is stiff and, though his cane has a dedicated button, it is useless against the enemies he encounters. These perceived drawbacks are of metaphorical significance. In the novella, Jekyll, dedicated to maintaining his composure and status as an affluent, intelligent, and successful member of Victorian society, never exercises his violent tendencies on those around him. Meanwhile, Hyde exercises violence openly after having experienced a prolonged period of

caged dormancy, using his cane to brutally murder Sir Danvers Carew, a seventy-year-old member of Parliament. Carew's maid recounts the encounter in graphic detail:

> And then all of a sudden he broke out in a great flame of anger, stamping with his foot, brandishing the cane, and carrying on (as the maid described it) like a madman. The old gentleman took a step back … and at that Mr. Hyde broke out of all bounds and clubbed him to the earth. And next moment, with ape-like fury, he was trampling his victim under foot and hailing down a storm of blows, under which the bones were audibly shattered and the body jumped upon the roadway. (25)

In the game's revisionist timeline, Carew is still alive and well for no definitive reason, though it would surely be awkward to conceal the murder of your prospective father-in-law in the face of your fiancée at the altar.

In a metatextual fashion, the player's frustrations toward Jekyll's limitations are emblematic of human experience. We, as the player, experience the rigidity of unflinchingly maintaining a social role in a classist society. Often described as tedious, repetitive, and unforgiving, Jekyll's daytime levels mirror the mindset and lifestyle of the doctor, fearing besmirching his reputation as a member of the Victorian elite. He cannot indulge in immoral desire, suppresses his violent ideations, and bears the burden of social expectation, hence his experimentation with the serum as an escape. Fittingly, the player is denied the opportunity to inflict harm on Jekyll's adversaries although a defined button is there for the cane. An immediate impulse to initiate an attack on any perceived threat mirrors contemporary video game logic, something ingrained for decades at this point. But *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* condemns traditional gaming sensibilities, grounding the player by stripping them of the empowering trappings of immersive and fantastical worlds that video games afford. Though the ability to manipulate an

avatar is evocative of undertaking the role of God—a moral one in this case—this game will not allow such a fantasy to triumph. Using the cane against civilians expedites Jekyll's transformation into Hyde, leaving him vulnerable during the attack's frame window—the animation of his cane thrusting forward and returning to his side. As Jekyll cannot simultaneously move and attack, the timed animation locks him in place. This mechanic cleverly punishes the player for exercising cruelty over even-temperedness, maintaining thematic accuracy. Fascinatingly, the game incorporates a currency system in which Hyde, upon defeating an enemy, can collect a coin that can be used during Jekyll's segments, in "more civilized" fashion, to bribe enemies to leave. The player's imperative role is to guide Jekyll to his wedding at the church by avoiding confrontation. Violence is not fruitful, nor does it afford progress.

Conversely, many critics of the game reference the Hyde sections as being more entertaining, lamenting the fact that they result in the ultimate penalty, a game over, if they persist for an elongated period. As Hyde, players are finally afforded the opportunity to move fluidly, unleash potent attacks, and experience a more traditional gameplay loop. This aligns with Jekyll's perspective of transforming into Hyde:

> There was something strange in my sensations, something indescribably new and, from its very novelty, incredibly sweet. I felt younger, lighter, happier in body; within I was conscious of a heady recklessness, … an unknown but not an innocent freedom of the soul. (64)

How fitting is this? Players seek refuge from the dull world of Jekyll in favor of Hyde's destructive jaunts through a macabre London. It is easy for the player to become lost in the frantic side-scrolling gameplay—blasting away demons and jumping over obstacles with far more finesse—dismissing the jeopardy that our protagonist is in. The developers captured the essence of Hyde's

liberating recklessness. Graphically, the colors appear richer and the sprites more abstract, "sensual" in their own right. Many of the demons the player encounters are borderline Lovecraftian in nature, notably Shepp and Eproschka, defined by tendrils, wings, and grotesque shapes.

In Chapter 10 of the novella, Jekyll states, "I was slowly losing hold of my original and better self, and becoming slowly incorporated with my second and worse" (70). Engaging in darker impulses is tempting, but comes at a cost. In Bandai's game, Hyde advances to the left regardless of the user's directional input, evoking an additional lack of control Jekyll has over his alter ego. Jekyll has some semblance of free-will; Hyde advances forward with reckless abandon in the name of carnage. In order to succeed, the player must carefully balance the forces of good and evil, exercising their own temperance and subduing their own gaming impulses—literally embodying the predicament of Jekyll.

Such duality extends to the final section of the game, in which there are two endings—ambitious and innovative for a game from 1988. To get the "normal" ending, you walk Jekyll to church without Hyde ever catching up, and you win. To get the "good" ending (which to me is more a "true" ending), you have to advance Jekyll to the street stage (Stage 6, the final stage), then, unintuitively, take enough damage to trigger his transformation into Hyde—remember, these stages are to be avoided to prevent a potential game over. Bizarrely, the framework of the game is shaken up—Jekyll and Hyde now present themselves as separate characters, not two beings vying for control. Hyde will climb on the rooftops, allowing him to "pass over" Jekyll, so that they never intersect and no lightning strikes to kill the player. This is the only level in which the player is rewarded for making progress with Hyde, the final destination being a church silhouetted, *Castlevania*-like, by the light of the moon. This conjures a boss fight where Hyde confronts Letule, a disembodied head symbolic of the ultimate evil harbored within. After carefully weaving through

fireballs, contending with unpredictable teleportation, and dealing enough damage with the "Psycho Wave," Letule explodes with the crisp staccato of the NES sound chip. In the Japanese release of the game, a small silhouette appears, hanging from the crumbling cross on top of the church in the background. The North American version changed the graphic to something that cannot be identified—perhaps a surrogate for Jekyll in this alternate timeline who no longer has to commit suicide as a final means of escape? He evidently finds absolution. Now, there are no more stressors leading up to the church, and the player can walk to the end of the game. Without any further opposition, Jekyll no longer has to contest with Hyde for control, marries the woman of his dreams, and lives happily ever after.

The Bandai title's wide-ranging difference from the novella allows the game to be viewed as a commentary on adapting literature into other media. Taking liberties with the source material, its most evident changes in additional characters, enemies, and modified plot can be viewed as the metaphorical introduction of frustrations and absurdities in Jekyll's life. Self-aware in its failures and alterations, the title's introduction of new hazards serves to comment on how literature, when filtered through the lens of new media, can either dilute or enhance underlying thematic elements. Fortunately, the arbitrary and nonsensical obstacles' disruption of progress mirrors how Hyde disrupts Jekyll. Being victim to attacks by incongruous characters or bizarre hazards reflects the surreal and nightmarish experience of Jekyll losing himself to Hyde. The game's unstructured, often nonsensical challenges represent a chaotic intrusion into an ordered world. Yet, such absurdity is not out of place in a narrative that explores the thin, fragile line between civility and madness in the Victorian landscape. Rather, it reflects the disintegration of Jekyll's controlled rational self and his eventual surrender to the irrationality embodied by Hyde.

Works Cited

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