

Malkavians in Vampire The Masquerade Bloodlines

Abstract

Games, as a medium, may not have the best reputation in terms of representation, but few issues get treated as poorly as mental health.

Through the decades, games have gained a notoriety of excluding people who aren't seen as their target audience, especially through low representation of women, people of color and different sexualities. On top of that, certain genres particularly horror games, have developed an ill-reputation of stigmatizing mental illnesses through a negative portrayal, which often equates people with such illnesses to monsters. *Vampire The Masquerade Bloodlines* (Troika, 2004) presents a rare example in games of an empathic and meaningful portrayal by humanizing characters with mental illnesses of the Malkavian clan.

Introduction

Certain genres of games, particularly military shooters and horror games, rely on othering to antagonize the player towards those it seeks to portray as in-game enemies. Many techniques used for this involve negative portrayal of certain types of people, particularly those with mental illnesses. For example, *Silent Hill* (Konami Computer Entertainment Tokyo, 1999) and *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* (Silicon Knights, 2002) have often utilized mechanics like sanity meters to describe the mental state of the player who is suffering from mental illnesses. If the meter is filled to its maximum, it would generally result in the player character going "insane" and losing the game. *Far Cry 3* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2012) portrays the primary antagonist whose only basis for brutality is their

implied insanity (Lindsey, Patrick, *Polygon*). This process of Othering is deeply problematic, as on top of reinforcing existing stereotypes about a group of people, it further deepens the stigma surrounding them by misrepresentation.

Bloodlines, released in 2004, is a computer RPG based on the White Wolf universe of tabletop games. Like every game in the RPG genre, the player in *Bloodlines* is given the choice to customize their character at the start and choose any one of the six classes, each of them based on the Vampire Clans in the game's universe.

One of the clans, the Malkavians, are a group of vampires who suffer from a variety of mental illnesses including hallucination and schizophrenia. However, within Kindred, the colloquial term for the community of Vampires in the game's universe, they are treated as equals, and are often regarded as Seers and Oracles. Even within the Camarilla, the ruling body of the Kindred, Malkavians are given an equal seat of power, and thus represented fairly. By establishing a setting which treats characters with mental illnesses with respect allows *Bloodlines* to humanize key Malkavian non-player characters, and communicate empathy to the player.

Effects of Misrepresentation through Negative Depiction

One of the most common misconceptions perpetuated by the stigmatizing mechanics of horror games is the false equivalency that mental illnesses lead to criminally violent behavior (Grohol, John, *Psych Central*). Many horror games use mental asylums as their setting and task the sane player to fight against the demented patients and escape alive. (Mahar, Ian, *Kotaku*.) Moreover, the game encourages the reaction of player towards such patients to be negative, by Othering them and equating them to sub-humans or monsters. This indicates that such games carry problematic values in their representation, which could negatively affect behaviour towards

actual people suffering from such conditions. Many believe that “*games have inherent values which they instil in their players through play*”. (Flanagan and Nissenbaum 7)

Media portrayal plays an important role in reinforcing the stigmas surrounding mental illnesses in people’s mind. (Levin, Aaron, *Psychiatric News*). Mahar reflects similar opinions by saying that, “*There is a social obligation to protect vulnerable members of society from misrepresentation, and to correct misrepresentations, especially within an industry partly responsible for disseminating them*”. (Mahar, Ian, *Kotaku*)

Bloodlines consciously avoids this negative stereotyping by carefully portraying every Malkavian NPC you meet during the course of the game as non-aggressive. This is also consistent with their canonized behaviour in the universe as that of Seers and Oracles. Most of the Malkavians you meet in *Bloodlines* are aloof, eccentric and insightful, but never violent or aggressive.

Let’s take two chief, story-critical Malkavian NPCs that the player meets during the course of the game to analyse how *Bloodlines* portrays people with mental illnesses in a non-stigmatizing manner.

A Tale of Two Malkavians



[Figure 1: Therese (left) and Jeanette (right) Voerman]

Therese/Jeanette Voerman, the proprietor of the Asylum Bar, suffers from a dissociative identity disorder (DID). Within the game, the player first meets them as twin sisters with distinct personalities, who are in constant conflict with one another. Therese acts as the serious, confident and commanding half, while Jeanette is the playful, flirtatious and friendly one. Each refers to the other half in third-person, a common symptom for someone suffering from such a condition. In addition, *Bloodlines* through the player's conversations with them adds a deeply traumatic childhood for Therese/Jeanette, where she was in an abusive relationship with her father. Multiple post-traumatic stress disorders are one of the most common reasons attributed to DID (Spiegel 2). The game through Therese/Jeanette's background provides a foundation to humanize her character. It also characterizes both the identities in subtle ways for the sake of suspense and the consistency of its portrayal of Malkavians. Both Therese and Jeanette are respected by other NPCs in *Bloodlines* world and it presents an example of the game providing a safe space in its universe to the Malkavians.

Seeing the world treat Malkavians like Therese/Jeanette with respect acts as a deterrent for the player to otherize them for their mental illnesses. *Bloodlines* shows that by adding a personal background to a character and by treating Malkavians with respect, humanizes them and makes it easier for player to empathize with them.

In a similar vein, *Bloodlines* presents Dr. Alistair Grout, the patriarch of the Malkavian clan, who besides representing the entire clan politically in the Camarilla, also happens to be a deeply respected psychologist. The player doesn't have too many interactions with him until they are tasked to explore his mansion and investigate his disappearance. The player finds out more about Grout's character through his audio logs, which are scattered across his mansion. Grout is revealed to be an intelligent scientist intent on finding the cure to vampirism but is burdened by his own paranoia. *Bloodlines* paints Grout as a genius recluse being overwhelmed by his schizophrenia. His audio logs often read as the diary entry of someone struggling with their own mind's condition. For example, an audio log features Grout talking about breakthroughs in his research, while being apprehensive of the voices and wanting to keep what he had learnt a secret from them. Such a deeply personal perspective, provides a considerable insight into the daily struggles of someone dealing with schizophrenia. Instead of Othering Grout, *Bloodlines* chooses to portray his struggles along the lines of what many people with schizophrenia face in their lives.

Foreshadowing for Experienced Players



[Figure 2: A Malkavian Player Character in conversation with a NPC]

Bloodlines' surprising ambition comes to fore when the player themselves play as a Malkavian character. Unlike other clans, a Malkavian Player Character (PC) has a largely different script and they often speak in convoluted and vague dialogues to other NPCs. Moreover, the dialogue choices offered by *Bloodlines* change considerably when playing as a Malkavian. They reflect a vague tone which is cryptic and opaque to a first-time player. However, what's interesting to note is that these very dialogues are designed to serve as foreshadowing to a player on a repeat playthrough. Many of these dialogues subtly hint major revelations well before they are actually scripted to occur in the game's plot. For example, in *Figure 2*, the dialogue options provided to a Malkavian PC, while they are conversing with a NPC include an option (number 2 in *Figure 2*) which foreshadows the event where the NPC tricks the players. This dual purpose of the game's writing suggests a conscious design

decision to not just serve different types of players, but also to showcase the insightful, Seer-like knowledge Malkavians have about the future. To add to this, a Malkavian PC hears soft whispers in their game's audio signifying the hallucinatory symptoms shared by all members of the Malkavian clan.

Such an experiential simulation of a player character suffering from mental illness is refreshingly different from how they are typically portrayed in games. The narrative foreshadowing through convoluted dialogues and hallucinatory whispers in the game audio suggest an experience designed for an advanced player who is already familiar with the game's storyline. By doing that, *Bloodlines* also implies that while words of someone suffering from mental illnesses are often relegated to ramblings by society, they may contain wisdom that may require a deeper understanding. It still can be seen as a form of othering, but without the negative connotations that stigmatize people with mental illnesses. The kind of understanding, which in the context of the game, that only players who have experienced the game would have.

Despite *Bloodlines* attempts, it does not truly succeed on all fronts in positively portraying Malkavians. It often uses some of their dialogue options as a humour relief in the game by exaggerating their symptomatic behaviour. Two popular sequences in the game which are often cited as examples of this are the conversations the Malkavian PC has with a STOP sign on the street and with a TV. In the former example, the Malkavian PC engages with a STOP sign on the street in a verbal argument on who can proceed ahead. In both cases, *Bloodlines* exaggerates the behaviour of Malkavian PC to almost cartoonish levels through game's dialogues, in order to draw out the humor. While such humor can be seen as mocking stereotypical behavior of people with mental illnesses, it can also be seen as a rare, light-hearted portrayal of a grim topic inside an equally dark and grim game.

Conclusion

Consistently negative portrayal of people with mental illnesses in horror games have only reinforced the stigma surrounding them by Othering them, and consequently lowering the self-esteem of people suffering through such conditions. *Bloodlines* offers a refreshingly progressive take on such issues by creating a world that treats them with respect, and as equals. It follows up with an empathic portrayal of NPCs suffering from dissociative identity disorder and schizophrenia by humanizing them with a deeply personal background. But, it is by communicating the symptoms of such mental illnesses to the player through narrative and mechanics that *Bloodlines* achieves maximum empathy. By placing players in the shoes of someone they're being challenged to understand, *Bloodlines* encourages them to relate with characters that have been otherwise misrepresented in the medium.

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