

The year's worst video game writing

When I think of bad video game dialogue, I'm reminded of this tweet: the thinly veiled exposition, the personality quirks as a stand-in for actual characterization, the stilted and strangely paced delivery. Basically, this is the way no person speaks or has ever spoken.

And yet, in most video games, this is how every character comes across, like an alien figuring out how to sound like a human in real time. It's so pervasive that you learn to live with it – or you press X to skip ahead.

But what gets me are the games where the bad writing is completely unnecessary. This year, I'm thinking of a couple of games specifically: two where I loved actually playing them, until the moments where they forced me to sit and listen to atrocious dialogue for no reason.

I'm going to pick on *Neon White*, which is still a very good game that I would recommend. It's a first-person speedrunner with clever level design – a combination of readable elements and mechanics that make parkouring across the map intuitive and satisfying. I'm neither a twitchy perfectionist nor a completionist, but the game compelled me to shave milliseconds off of my time. (A sneaky leaderboard shows you scores from your friends, and I suddenly became very competitive with Jay.)

But everything comes to a halt as soon as you finish each series of stages. Suddenly, there is a bewildering amount of plot and a bizarre cast of characters screeching at you about... nothing. Here is some actual dialogue:

Neon White: I feel the strongest connection to you...

Neon Red: ...

Neon White: [internal monologue] Dammit White! Why would you say something so lame to a girl?

This is just a snippet – the whole scene is two and a half minutes long, complete with lazy innuendo about a character's "measurements." For a game about speed and rigor, it's strange that *Neon White* bogs itself down with a whole lot of between-level filler. The characters are cloying and horny; the plot is a total distraction.

You could call it camp or you could recognize it for what it is: cringe

Even weirder, the game knows what it's doing. *Neon White's* dialogue deliberately plays up the tropes of anime, everything from exaggerated gestures and loud gasps and guffaws to infantilized voices. And to what end? The game truly has nothing meaningful to say. *Neon White* is obnoxious for what reason exactly? You could call it camp or you could recognize it for what it is: cringe.

But the worst offender I encountered this year was *Marvel's Midnight Suns*. And like *Neon White*, this is a game I enjoyed a lot when it wasn't talking at me. Developed by Firaxis Games, *Midnight Suns* is a blast: a total reinvention of the *XCOM* formula that the company rebooted a decade ago. But here, the precision and patience of duck-and-cover tactics have been traded for the creativity and risk-taking of a deckbuilder. The result is a surprisingly novel hybrid turn-based strategy / card game.

But everything in *Midnight Suns* that's not a battle is a slog. Between missions, you spend your time back at home, chatting up other Marvel superheroes and doing small chores at a base

called the Abbey. These light interactions boost your relationships with the characters, making them stronger in upcoming fights. (The mechanics are nakedly unsentimental, considering you are theoretically improving “friendship.”) It’s a gameplay loop that will remind you of *Fire Emblem: Three Houses*.

Midnight Suns often feels like it wants to be a different game, or maybe it’s just hard to understate how much it wants to be *Three Houses*. Whereas the combat system was reimaged to fit the Marvel theme (after all, superheroes don’t creep around for cover), the high school friendship system feels like it was grafted onto its characters. It’s basically a romance mechanic – you can take Wolverine on a long walk or go stargazing with him – except you’ll never be able to smooch the grizzly mutant. He’ll just thank you for your time and be slightly buffed for the next battle.

At the same time, all the dialogue suffers from what my colleague Ash described to me as “Joss Whedon mouth.” When characters aren’t detailing an overly broad plot, they’re piping in with painfully unfunny quips. This feels somewhat consistent with the current universe of Marvel films, which are slacker comedies broken up by big action set pieces. But if the humor of MCU movies can be defined by their effortlessness, *Midnight Suns* is constantly trying too hard.

I think I could stand it if there just wasn’t so damn much of it! At one point, Blade reluctantly admits to you that he has a crush on Captain Marvel. Instead of telling *her* that, he decides to start a book club so they can spend more time together. He invites you, too, and somehow Captain America also overhears and invites himself along.

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I’m making this sound funnier than it actually is, and it

might've been amusing if the game were a self-aware reinvention of these characters. No, instead, playing *Midnight Suns* means hearing all three characters – Blade, Captain Marvel, and Captain America – tell you all of their feelings about the book club selection – which, of course, is Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. This drags on seemingly forever, until the day finally ends and *Midnight Suns* allows you to experience what you came for: playing the actual video game.

There was a lot of standout writing in games this year: *Citizen Sleeper* succeeded as a quiet, somber Tumblrcore space opera; *Norco's* turned its sharp anti-corporate politics and depressive vibes into a compelling point-and-click adventure. But the whole point of those games was the writing.

It's the places where dialogue is treated like filler, as in *Neon White* and *Midnight Suns*, where it becomes annoying. There, all of the writing exists outside of the core mechanics, completely divorced from the games themselves. But at least the games show you the mercy of making it skippable.

Eventually in *Midnight Suns*, Wolverine also joins the book club but refuses to do the reading. Blade is annoyed that he hasn't put in the effort. Still, this was probably the most relatable character moment for me: Wolverine, listening to people babble and simply putting up with it.

<https://www.theverge.com/23511142/midnight-suns-neon-white-worst-video-game-writing-2022>