Review of dot-Hack//Infection

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1 What it is

"Dot-Hack // Infection" is a single-player game for Playstation 2. It was released in North American on 12 February 2003. It is the first of four games in a series called "dot-Hack".[2]

Besides the four video games, the dot-Hack concept is expressed in a television series & a forthcoming manga.

1.1 General

In general, I enjoyed the game a lot (8/10). It has some flaws which are seriously annoying, but with dot-Hack // Infection, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

2 Concept 10/10

Dot-Hack // Infection is a single-player game for PS2, but within this single-player game, you are a person who plays a massively multiplayer online RPG called "The World". It seems that there are some problems with "The World", & these problems somehow can affect people in the real world. While playing dot-Hack, you spend much of your time controlling a character named Kite in

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[1]I will not threaten legal action if you deep-link, but I cannot guarantee that the nodes within this document will have constant names (URLs). I ensure only that the URL in the citation will remain. People & companies who threaten legal action for deep-linking are incontinent bozos.

[2]Actually, the series is called ".hack", but that is so grammatically incorrect that I cannot bring myself to type it other than in this footnote.

"The World", but you also log-out of that MMORPG to read your e-mail & online news where you sometimes find key information that you use when you login to "The World" again.

So Dot-Hack // Infection is a single-player game that contains a multiplayer game. While playing dot-Hack, you play the multiplayer game & use a desktop computer (simulated on your PS2) to read e-mail & Usenet.

The pretend online multiplayer game ("The World") does a nice job of capturing the feel of an online game. I was impressed by that. For example, other characters in "The World" (which are controlled by NPCs in dot-Hack) are reasonably realistic. Sure, they say silly things & if you keep talking to them, they repeat, but overall, they do a better job of capturing the feel of a true online RPG than I would have thought possible. Like in town, there are all these people running helter-skelter with speech-bubbles over their heads, just like you see in real MMORPGs. Some of those NPCs have personalities that I've seen in online games, too. It can get kind of funny at times because of that.

3   Story 9/10

Using that fantastic concept, the story unfolds at a decent pace. It's enjoyable, but some of the required quests become repetitious near the middle of the story. Basically, it feels like the game degenerates to a dungeon crawl. It's a good dungeon crawl, & it's still backed by the fantastic concept, but it's a dungeon crawl nonetheless.

4   Graphics 7/10

The graphics aren't pushing the limits of my PS2, & they don't give me a "wow" buzz. Also, I don't care much for the looks of the main character when I'm logged into "The World". The graphics aren't bad, & the environments are creative & artistic, sometimes even magical, but most of them aren't very exciting. I mostly enjoyed the ones where the bug in "The World" shows through & the ones that look like an idealistic Fall scene in a field. That latter type of environment is really beautiful.

Still, the game hardly makes use of the graphical capabilities of the Playstation 2.

The in-game movie segments are better than the during-play graphics. They do have a good "wow" factor.

5   Soundtrack 9/10

The soundtrack is great, that goes for the music & the sound effects. The sounds when the main character (Kite) uses his special power are so cool that I have sometimes used that power just to hear the noises.

The voice acting is generally great.[3] One or two of the voices are annoying, but I get the idea they were meant to be that way, so maybe their annoying factor is an accomplishment.

6   Combat 6/10

The basic flow is good, but the combat system has some annoying quirks. Like, camera control can make or break you. To me, the idea that a camera can get me killed is just nuts.

The combat system puts lots of information on the screen in real-time. Much of that info is in boxes above or near the creature it concerns. It's usually useful info, but sometimes it gets in the way of what you need to see. Possibly a better algorithm for what, when, & where to display all that info could fix things.

The combat system makes good use of tell-tale noises to alert you to low hit-points, times to use your unique super-power, & some other details. That's nice.

Overall, the combat system feels clunky. Clunky by design, not by sloppy implementation. Even after I got used to it & had high-level characters which could bash nearly any monster before they took much damage themselves, it felt clunky. I wouldn't let this put me off the game because other things (namely the concept) are so great, but if you wanted an RPG because you wanted to do RPG combat, this ain't the RPG for you.

7   Replay Value

Once you finish the story, you get one or two more tiny side quests. Even after finishing them, you can do some dungeon-crawling, though the story does not progress. I enjoyed the game enough that I've done a dungeon or two almost every night in the week since I finished the game. I'm also considering running through it again from the beginning. I'd say the replay value is fair or better.

Sunday, 6 July, 2003, months after writing the previous paragaph: As it turned out, before buying *.hack 2*, I played through nearly forty hours of dungeons, just because I enjoyed running through the dungeons, not to level-up. Though I didn't play every week, & didn't do any marathon, multi-hour sessions in that time, I was running through dungeons for fun until about the day before I bought *.hack 2*. So the replay value is excellent. (I never did start the story from the beginning.)

8   Extras

Dot-Hack // Infection comes with a 45-minute animé movie on a second DVD disc that introduces you to the problem the dot-Hack world is facing when a

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[3]I especially love the voice of a character named Mistrel. The actress who did her voice did a great job.

bug in "The World" starts affecting people in the dot-Hack world. The second disk also contains interviews of two of the game's creators.

Also, other things I've read, & also the interviews on the second DVD, say that you'll be able to read your saved game from dot-Hack // Infection into the next installment of the dot-Hack serial. Cool.

9   Improvements

It'd be nice if I could customize the main character like I could in a real MMORPG. I could at least customize his appearance, I'd think. I don't suspect that would take a lot of programming effort for the dot-Hack implementors.

The combat system could be improved, smoothed out. It's functional now, but once or twice in each battle, some quirk of the combat system makes me grit my teeth: an off-screen monster, a crappy camera view because I was too close to the wall, or a field of view entirely obscured by data bubbles & dialog from my NPC party members. I don't mean there are bugs; it appears to be a quality implementation & to do exactly what it was designed to do. It's just that the design itself is clunky.

The environments are clever & interesting, but they became repetitious after only a few hours. This goes double for the dungeons. It'd be nice if future installments in the series had more variation.

10   Recommendations

I recommend it pretty highly. Not "gotta have it" recommended, but pretty highly nonetheless. The game-within-a-game concept is what makes it. Despite its technical flaws & uninspiring graphics, dot-Hack // Infection is somehow a great game. I'm already counting the days until the second installment is released.

11   Review of .hack//Mutation

Sunday, 6 July 2003, one half-hour after finishing .hack//Mutation, *which is .hack part 2.*

.hack//Mutation, the second part of the game, doesn't need a separate review. It's more of the same – which is great – until the very end. So during most of *.hack 2*, you find are keywords from the message board, e-mail, or other characters. You visit them, find a new item, a new character, or new keywords. It goes on like that until very near the end, when the story takes, not quite a twist but an expansion. I didn't expect that at all. It was a nice surprise.

.hack//Mutation may be shorter. It took me about 25 hours to finish, whereas I needed 35 hours to finishe *.hack//Outbreak*. A great game, especially if, like me, you loved the first one & want to play the whole series. I

expect to get the same, excellent "dungeon-crawling for crawling's sake" replay value from it that I got from

Also, I see that my original review was kind of harsh on the game. I said there were "technical flaws" & "uninspiring graphics". Now that I've played two parts, I don't know what technical flaws I meant when I wrote that. While the graphics don't make me say "I didn't know my Playstation 2 could do that", they have good atmosphere. So maybe the graphics are uninspiring technically, but they are inspiring artistically. The music is good or better, often excellent, all the time.

References