SILENT HILL 2

Game Title: Silent Hill 2
Platform: PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC
Genre: Survival Horror
Release Date: September 24, 2001
Developer: Team Silent, Konami Computer Entertainment Tokyo
Publisher: Konami
Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Hiroyuki Owaku
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Overview
James Sunderland (the main character) comes to the town of Silent Hill after receiving a letter from his wife Mary, who had died three years prior. Despite the illogical implications of the letter, James decides to enter town and search for her in their “special place.” During his search, James encounters strange monsters which serve to hinder his progress. He also meets a few odd characters who have come to Silent Hill in search of something. One of them is a woman named Maria, who looks exactly like James’ wife but more sensuous (clothing, tattoos, and florishments). As James progresses deeper and deeper into Silent Hill, he begins questioning what he knows about his wife’s death and so do the other characters. When James finally reaches his “special place”, he learns the grim truth. He murdered Mary. His acceptance of the truth finally leads him to destroy his inner demons that torment him in the projected forms of Maria and a monster named Pyramid Head.

The protagonist is psychologically troubled, and his journey through Silent Hill leads him to a variety of possible psychological resolutions. This story is told by combining three strong elements into a fascinating narrative about a healing the soul. One, the character that James meets are reflections of his psyche with which he must reconcile in order to be at peace. Two, the monsters James deals with display his skewed views of women. Defeating these monsters helps to get James to the root of his psychological problems. Three, the love letters that James passes through represent the journey he made three years prior from the beginnings of Mary’s sickness until her death. Silent Hill represents the journey to atonement of his twisted psyche. His journey symbolizes his psychological descent to repressed psychological layers of denial and guilt before he accepts the truth.

Characters
- James Sunderland, the protagonist, has come to Silent Hill in search of his late wife Mary. Though appearing calm on the outside, inside James, is an emotional wreck trying to come to terms with his repressed memories. As he delves deeper into Silent Hill, James begins to remember the past events that transpired in his life. He ultimately learns that his calling to Silent Hill wasn’t about finding Mary, but about facing his inner demons. He learns this by interacting with self-projections symbolized by other characters.
- Maria Shepherd-Sunderland is the deceased wife of James. Marvy and James shared a good life together before her sickness. As Mary became weaker and more ill, her anger over her failing health manifested itself in lashing out at James. She knows of the turmoil stirring within James, and despite James’ mixed emotions, she still loves him.
- Laura, a young girl whom James meets at one of his “special places”, bears a striking resemblance to Mary; however, she is the polar opposite of Mary, in dress and personality. Maria is the archetypal temptress, and promises she can be in every way. She is the fantasy version of Mary, and is also James’ tormentor. Depending on the ending obtained by the player, Maria’s role varies from being James’ punishment to being James’ reward—a reward with a twist.
- Laura is a young girl wandering Silent Hill also in search of Mary. Laura represents innocence, and her association with James is unclear. Laura acts as a brat who holds essential information regarding Mary and her last days. Laura’s knowledge of Mary clashes with James and this confuses him. He doesn’t know which version of events is true of not, so over time James accepts that his version of events is untrue. She is the only character who does not see monsters in Silent Hill, and is one of James’ key shadows.
- Mary Shepherd is a person who has come to a lonesome, dead end of a run down apartment with a corpse lying in the kitchen, Eddie claims innocence and denies responsibility for murdering other people (including a dog). As James gradually comes to terms with the truth, Eddie also accepts the error of his ways and this brings some semblance into the endgame. He is also one of James’ key shadows.
- Angela Rosco, the first character James encounters, has come to Silent Hill in search of her family. Angela is the epitome of youthful innocence, is another key shadow of James. She is suicidal and symbolizes James’ own tendency – she warns James of this danger in Silent Hill. Ironically, like James, she shrugs at the thought of committing suicide. With each interaction with James, her demeanor deteriorates until she can no longer repress her suicidal wishes.
- Pyramid Head is a monster known only to James and Maria. He functions as an executioner of both the monsters and the visitors in Silent Hill. James finally comes to the realization that he needs the Pyramid Head(s) as someone to judge him for his sins. After James admits and contronts the truth, Pyramid Head(s) impale themselves on their own spears.

Breakdown
Silent Hill 2 offers players a compelling and complex psychologically immersive story in a game. The player experiences the psychological dimensions of the avatar (James) due to accurate and consistent use of symbolism in the psychological projections of characters, monsters, and the symbolic progression of scenes. The story is rich and well developed because all elements of the story, including choices made by the player, play a large role in the way James serves to deepen his identity. Each of the characters that James meets represents a side of his own psyche. The locations that James visits on his journey also represent elements of his past - areas that hold significance—from Mary’s decline in health to her death, James’ premise depends on having appropriate choices at the start, different approaches lead to different endings. Therefore, the story of Silent Hill 2 has multiple outcomes that are both distinctive and satisfying. The result is a strong narrative laced with emotion that mimics James’ fluctuating state of mind.

Silent Hill 2 offers the player a psychological dynamic in which the hero interacts with his shadow as projected into narrative events and characters. The player in Silent Hill 2 must choose to either direct in order to change James’ projected personae. Lucy, the character that James encounters reflect the psychological dynamic of the player, and how they change in regards to Lucy reflect the choices players make. For example, if a player chooses to help Lucy, her persona becomes more responsible and less aggressive. If a player chooses to hurt Lucy, her persona becomes more dangerous and less responsible. This symbolic representation of the player’s choices allows for a deeper understanding of the game’s themes and mechanics. The player is forced to confront their own inner demons and make difficult choices, which ultimately leads to the player’s exploration of their own psyche.

The game’s psychological depth is further enhanced by its use of symbolism. The concept of the “special place” is a recurring theme throughout the game, representing James’ past memories and experiences. Each special place holds significance to the player’s character development and ultimately leads to a deeper understanding of their own psyche.

The game’s themes revolve around concepts such as freedom of expression, the importance of self-reflection, and the consequences of choices. These themes are explored through the game’s narrative, which is told through a series of flashbacks and cutscenes, as well as through the character interactions and choices the player must make.

Overall, Silent Hill 2 is a psychological horror game that offers a deep and immersive experience for players. The game’s use of symbolism and thematic elements, as well as its engaging narrative, make it a standout entry in the horror genre.
fantasies and grounding himself back in reality. This classic dynamic of the hero and his shadow(s) serves to deepen both James and the characters he interacts with. James and Laura have an awkward relationship full of misunderstandings. It is hard for James to connect with others because of his deep psychological conflict. James' family is a key element in this personal drama. The projection of Laura as a child symbolizes James' innocence. This is defined best by two of Laura's characteristics. She doesn't see any danger in Silent Hill, and she doesn't see the monsters, like James, in search of his own innocence but is unaware of their malevolence.

Eddie is a symbolic projection of James' denial of responsibility for Mary's death. When James meets Eddie, he is asked whether he denies it, or he is tempted by it, because he cannot see his denial as persistent, and, as ugly as he is. Eddie is a perfect reflection of all ugly truth about James. Eddie's tendency to deny responsibility for his actions, such as killing a man for looking at him funny. But he also lies about his death and the other men's deaths, leading to his denial in his own denial. The game's narrative and Eddie's development are intertwined, and he is killed up to his killings. Eddie's denial makes him defensive and it results in a fight with James after a comment slips James' lips about Eddie being nuts. James also has a defensive, reactive behavior pattern. He begins his journey believing Mary died of her disease, and gets defensive when told otherwise. When James defeats Eddie, he reflects on killing a human being but then denial returns--he begins to question whether Mary died at all. When James kills Eddie, the action symbolizes the destruction of denial. The end to James' denial allows James to revisit the true “special place” where Mary died. Symbolically, he can only learn the truth by ending the lies.

Angela is an abused child, and she is a projection of this aspect of James' personality. She is depressed, lonely, afraid, distrustful, oppressed and guilty. This is a psychological complex that reflects both the way James feels about himself and the way he treated Mary (and views other women). Angela's loneliness is first shown in the cemetery where she meets James. Like James, Angela is searching for her family in the cemetery; both James and Angela are unable to let go of their lost ones, and the desire to connect with anyone else. Angela's distrust and fear of men come from the abuse by her father. She projects her images of fear and pain at James. Angela's inability to connect with James makes him feel unwanted by her and a shadow of Angela, James is uncomfortable with all, women. Although Maria is an idealized version of Angela, she can go from a temptress to a woman, Maria's repression of sexual trauma is also symbolic of her father's murder of her mother. These are the two events that trigger Maria's journey, and every one of them has blocked out, or repressed, information. This symbolizes the repression of memory associated to trauma. James has done this as well, and one of the reasons James has come to Silent Hill is to repress his memories of his mother and his own emotional trauma. He is also experiencing the trauma of his thoughts is her bloody knife, which she hands to James for safekeeping. This is dangerous for James even if he denies considering suicide. He holds onto this knife when Angela asks for it back, to which Angela asks sarcastically, “Is this the end of the line?” While Angela walks off into the flames to die, symbolizing the letting go of his feelings attributed to Angela. This allows James to finally understand the Pyramid Heads.

Maria is the main projection of James' unconscious desire for sensuality that his ill wife cannot satisfy. She is therefore a powerful shadow symbolizing unresolved desires. However Maria also torments James by using this to induce him to help him, specifically, to find the body of Silent Hill, the center of his issues. Maria comes into the picture when James finds her waiting at one of his special places. Though he does not find her, he finds a version of Mary he wishes he could have. Maria seems to come from another time for she is a modern version of Mary's imaginal. Maria represents the good and the bad. She tempts James with a promise of being his entirely, but is also the cause of sorrow when she is repeatedly killed along the journey. Maria punishes James with his own confusion, therefore pushing James deeper into his psychosis. Maria is the larger shadow of James, and at the end of the story, James faces Maria and kills her, ending his nightmarish torment (except for one of the endings, explained later). This symbolizes the end of James' self-induced nightmare and allows him to achieve his goal (determined by the player).

Virtually all the monsters in the game are also symbolic projections of James' shadow, attitudes towards females: birth trauma, sexual objectification, confusing innocence, expectations, responsibility, etc. The amorphous creepers are perhaps representative of mental patients in straight jackets, yet the monsters are bound by their own lies—naturally, imprisoned. The shambling nurses show the dementia view that James encounters in the hospital. The nurses are significant because they lead to the most important aspect of the game's monsters: they are objects—symbols of James' attitude toward all women. James encounters another creature that can be described as a bed-monster. Undoubtedly it is interpreted differently by different players. The nurse has clear overtones of the sexual trauma, but the other one of the monster may be her father looming over her. To James, it may be a bedridden Mary; it resembles Maria in her final form, encased in a bed frame. The other monster is Pyramid Head, the horrific version of an excuse for the town's past. Educational history is the major reason why the monster is the one visible to James, Maria, and the other monsters of Silent Hill, but it only serves to punish James as he admits at the end of the game. Pyramid Head is the only monster that James cannot kill because symbolically, Pyramid Head is a projection of James' punishing himself. James ends the torment by Pyramid Head when he confronts and admits to his need of the monster to judge him.

The protagonist's journey of atonement is carefully designed. The journey James takes to reach Mary is one that is not pieced together at random. What we get to experience is a retelling of the events that lead James to murdering his wife. This story begins with James and Mary in their apartment before her sickness sets in. The first stop in Silent Hill is the Blue Creek Apartment Complex, which goes from dark to decrepit as we cross from one side to the other. James' next stop is the Brookhaven Hospital, the step in his journey from where he deals with Mary's sickness. The real nightmare begins here: hospitals symbolize many things: birth, death, and life. James deals with his family's collective trauma, and he projects the sickness of Mary with Maria's coughing, the death of Mary with Maria's death by Pyramid Head, etc. Silent Hill changes from bright and happy to dark after the hospital visit. Mary had begun lashing out at James, and James was left to back his life; he looked like a man wounded in a battle. After the hospital, James visits the Silent Hill Historical Society. The place into which James descends takes him deep beneath the surface—both of Silent Hill and his psyche. He drops down a series of holes, so to speak, and enters a labyrinth that gets him to the root of the inner child. Each step in the labyrinth where Maria resides to tempt and punish him. This rings in perfect harmony with the confusion James felt; feelings of sadness and anger that led to the one decision James has regretted for the past three years. The projection of Edward is a very good example. From the prison to the pyramid to the hospital to the labyrinth, every step is a projection of the inner child, and the only monster Maria encounters is an inner child, who is both Mary and his innocence. It is only fitting that once James tells Laura he killed Mary that she leaves. After learning the truth, the story comes full circle; James now has to deal with the truth, i.e. face Pyramid Head and the two principal figures in his guilt.
it leaves room for interpretation, and the player is the one that determines the details of the ending. There are three primary endings to the story, each corresponding to one of the three characters that make up James psyche. If James spends more time thinking about Mary, the player achieves the “Leave” ending. After leaving, James is in the hospital in the final battle, where he confesses his guilt in her murder. Mary forgives James and gives him the last letter she ever wrote to him. James walks away with Laura, which cannot be described as walking away with his innocence, but his innocence of the game. The player spends time with Maria through the streets and hospital, and more time with events concerning Mary (like her monologue to James asking for forgiveness after berating him). If the player does the opposite, they receive the “Maria” ending. James still dies against Maria, driving him back to Maria after the final battle. This ending resonates with Eddie; James chooses to live in denial despite owning up to the truth of the murder. Maria is toughening in the end, the same way Mary was, signifying that James is doomed to repeat his mistakes. Last is the “Silent” ending, obtained by keeping James pure and healthy (not healing his wounds) and paying attention to the depressing items found during the journey, such as Angela and the suicide in the hospital roof. James realizes that what he wants isn’t Maria or forgiveness; he wants Mary herself, and after the battle with Maria he takes Mary’s corpse with him to his watery grave, uniting them once again.

Related to story telling dynamics, the strength of Silent Hill 2 is that it is coherent and consistent in its use of symbolism. All the characters are projections of James, and they serve to teach James about his inner workings of a disturbed mind. Because these characters reflect the main character they are integral assets to the story. Without them the story would be marginal instead of deep or meaningful. With consistent symbolism, the monsters serve the same projective function. His journey is a psychological recapitulation of his, descent into depression and anxiety. James subconscious motive for forcing himself to deal with the truth is provided by the player’s actions. No matter which way the story ends, there is no best ending. Each of the primary outcomes is satisfying and consistent with James’ psychological profile. This cleverly wrapped game delivers a great narrative that leaves little room for filler, and plenty of room for analysis. Silent Hill 2 embodies the theory: a great story that revolves around a psychological complex, having coherent depth and relevance to the character’s premise.

Strongest Element

The ambiguity of Silent Hill is one of the strongest elements of the story because it lets the player decide what is meaning of Hill. This increases player immersion and meaning to this story that varies from perspective to perspective. Silent Hill leaves one question up in the air: is all of this in James, Head, or is some other force putting him through this? Throughout Silent Hill are texts of the monsters’ relation to the player’s past, they are items that also speak directly to James. In the dark version of Silent Hill (after the hospital), an optional bit of text can be read on newspapers that says, “If you really want to see Mary, you should just die. Perhaps you are different than Mary James. Is the town judging James? Or is the judging himself? In terms of a great narrative it makes no difference, because either possibility is strong.

Unsuccessful Element

Outside of cut scenes, James never reacts to the monsters or his surroundings beyond simply looking at them. This suggests an unrealistic detachment on the part of the protagonist, and this detracts from player immersion.

Highlight

When James finds Maria behind prison bars in the labyrinth, Maria begins speaking to him in an omniscient manner. She asks James about the videotape he made with her, speaking as if she were Mary, Puzzled, James asks “Aren’t you Maria? Is the Mary you see real? Don’t you want to touch me?” Maria gently touches James face, enticing James to come and get her. Maria is dead on her bed by the time James reaches her. The promise of reality, and sensuality detours James into a depressing surprise only meant to hurt him physically. This scene gives you a real good idea that is true unsettling because she promises James anything he asks (including being whoever he wants her to be). This is also a really great exchange because you get to see James’ inner conflict with himself at its finest. Maria is an imaginary entity of James’ past, so James denies himself this fantasy even with Mary nowhere in sight. He wants Maria, but he is guilty for considering it. Set in the labyrinth, this scene is well placed in the twisted depths of James’ mind.

Critical Reception

It is generally agreed among critics that Silent Hill 2 is a well pieced together narrative. Metacritic gave Silent Hill 2 a score of 89, and Gamerankings.com gave it a score of 86%. However, others such as Gamespy - give ratings in the 90’s. What works best in this game is the cerebral experience that delves into the inner workings of a disturbed mind. An analysis written by Leigh Alexander entitled “Sundering the Mind” goes into detail on all the merits of the Silent Hill 2 story and its elements - from characters to monsters. As the author describes the complexities of this narrative, the way in which Silent Hill 2 accomplishes this balancing act is worthy of examination. As obscured in layered drama (much of it open to interpretation) as the fictional towns of Silent Hill is to the world, these logical layers are high upon interpretation. Analyzing the symbolism that appears with pitch-perfect thematic consistency throughout the entire game, however, the deliciously twisted realities, like the clamor of madness from every dark corner of the game’s world, are impossible to ignore. From the way the nurse moan as they lash out to the method of obtaining the multiple endings, the author agrees; Silent Hill 2 is a great story that uses consistent and coherent symbolism to tell a compelling psychological story.

Lessons

1) The plot should be secondary to the characters. Silent Hill 2’s plot is fairly simple: James is in search of the truth, but of the journey he takes is his journey. If James watched the video tape of his killing of Mary from the beginning, we would never truly understand his motivations or psychological makeup. It is only because of the interactions with his shadows (people and game) that James realizes he is being watched. Better yet, if James never faces his denial, he would have never experienced James’ depressed and oppressed side. Without Eddie, James never faces his denial Head on. Without Laura,
we would have no indication of James’ chasing his innocence. Maria, the nurses and the mannequins all reflect what James thinks about Mary and of women in general. To James, women are sexual objects that should please him, but they also torture him. Because these characters are so central to James’ identity, they all have purpose for existing in the story, and removing any of them would detract from the story.

• 2) The environment should communicate significance. The areas that James explores hold some meaning to him; in fact, they represent his journey to kill Mary. The player reenacts not only the kill, but James’ psychological issues as he decides to kill her. As the player progresses in the game, the areas he explores include symbols of his increasingly aberrant emotions. The symbolism expressed in the graphic environment provides valuable information about James and his journey.

• 3) Let the player discover a meaningful outcome in a meaningful way. The primary endings in Silent Hill 2 cannot be obtained by making one or two binary choices. The requirements are a bit more abstract, and they require the player to change their playing style to get different endings. For example, if the avatar spends less time with Maria and places more emphasis on Mary, the player gets the ending in which James seeks forgiveness. If the player spends more time on Maria, the player ends up with Maria. If the player chooses to keep James in poor health and focuses on the negative items, James will be depressed and commit suicide after destroying his inner demons. These outcomes all make sense and change James’ premise for coming to Silent Hill. The fact that the player determines the ending by manipulating the avatar in different ways makes it feel like the player is controlling the story (albeit in a subtle way). This is a great tool that should be explored more in the games to come.

• 4) Characters should react to their surroundings in a more unbelievable way during game play. Silent Hill 2 fails to do this. This is unfortunate because it steals a bit of immersion from the whole experience. The fact that James and Maria show no emotion in the presence of monsters is unsettling and out of character. This is an issue that persists in games (namely Survival/Horror games) to this day, and there is no good reason as to why this should persist.

Summation

It is surprising to think that a game like Silent Hill 2 stands out as one of the few examples of great narrative in a medium filled with storytelling potential that rivals film. Silent Hill 2 is an excellent example of how good storytelling in video games could be. I believe this to be true because Silent Hill 2 has an identifiable psychological pattern that makes it fascinating. The world of Silent Hill 2 is created to be James’ own personal hell, from the nightmarish Brookhaven hospital to the twisted labyrinths that lie beneath the Hillside. To James, the monsters are but a projection of his twisted psyche. The monsters in the game resonate with James’ mind, making the experience as personal as possible. The other characters are James’ many shadows, and through his interactions with these characters James can resolve his psychological issues and recover his psychological health. Because every facet of the story is a projection of a coherent avatar-player, the potential for story variation is enormous.