

SILENT HILL 2

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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 sensual (clothing, tattoos and flirtatious). 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 healing the soul. One, the characters 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 locations 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 progresses through Silent Hill, James begins to question his assumptions and memories. 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.
- Mary Shepherd-Sunderland is the deceased wife of James. Mary 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.
- Maria, a woman 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 his 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 or 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.
- Eddie Dombrowski is a projection of James' denial. He is first seen puking into a toilet 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 his own murderous tendencies in the end. He is also one of James' key shadows.
- Angela Orosco, the first character James encounters, has come to Silent Hill in search of her family. Abused by her father and alone in her torment, Angela is the epitome of victimization, and 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 confronts 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. This story is rich and well developed because all elements of the story, including choices made by the player, revolve around James and serve 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 how the player approaches the journey; different approaches lead to different endings. Therefore, the story of Silent Hill 2 has multiple outcomes that are each distinctive and satisfying. The result is a strong narrative laced with emotion that mimics James' fluctuating state of mind.

James personifies the classic psychological dynamic in which the hero interacts with his shadow as projected into narrative events and characters. The people that James encounters reflect the psychological qualities that James needs to correct in order to heal. Laura personifies James' innocence escaping him. To get her approval, James must change his image so that, in Laura's eyes, he is acceptable. Eddie exhibits James' denial, and ultimately Eddie must be killed to relieve James of his repressed memories. Angela is a concoction of James' depression and guilt for murdering Mary. Angela must die in the story so that James can deal with his anger and guilt. Maria embodies all of James' pain resulting from unsatisfied desire. Maria is James' final obstacle, and defeating Maria allows James to achieve peace by letting go of his

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 Laura because she is a kid. Her attitude and criticism of James reflects that of the inner child archetype. 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, Laura is in search of Mary--unaware that James has killed her. When James realizes he has killed his wife and explains this to Laura, he is compensating for the destruction of his own innocence. A major subplot of the game is James' pursuit of Laura, because she has what he needs. It isn't until the end of the game that James reconnects with his own innocence.

Eddie is a symbolic projection of James' denial of responsibility for Mary's death. When James meets Eddie for the first time, Eddie denies blame for the corpse lying in the kitchen. Eddie's denial is persistent; and, as ugly as he is, Eddie is a perfect reflection of an ugly truth about James. Eddie's lies center around denying responsibility for his actions, such as killing a man for looking at him funny. But he also lies to himself about the danger of Silent Hill. Eddie admits to his denial in his final exchange with James and owns 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 loved ones and unable to connect with anyone else. Angela's distrust and fear of men comes from the abuse by her father. She projects her fear onto James when she recoils from his touch and yells at him and condemns him. Like a shadow of Angela, James is uncomfortable with all women. Although Maria is an idealized version of Mary, he cannot give in to temptation out of fear and distrust. Angela's repression of sexual trauma is also symbolized by the various text documents lying around Silent Hill. These items talk about Angela's past, and every one of them has blocked out, or redacted, 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 remember Mary's murder. Angela's depression is her strongest emotion. The symbol of her suicidal 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 "saving it for yourself?" This isn't far off, and in fact, one of the endings is James' suicide. James lets Angela walk off into the flames to die, symbolizing the letting go of his feelings attributed to Angela. This allows James to confront the judgment by Maria and 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 his confusion against him, so she symbolizes all of James' negative emotions in the form of Mary, 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 Mary, he finds a version of Mary he wishes he could have. Maria seems too good to be true, and she is -- she is a figment of James' imagination. She's more than that; she 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 objectifications, confusing innocence, expectations, responsibility, etc. The armless creepers are perhaps representative of mental patients in straight jackets, yet the monsters are bound by their own flesh -- naturally imprisoned. The stumbling nurses show the demented view that James has of women; horrifying as they lash out at James with long metal pipes, but they also wear provocative mini-skirts and moan as they attack. They are nightmarish monsters, but also James' sexual fantasy. The conjoined mannequins are no exception -- walking pairs of legs that define strong sexual undertones for James. The most important characteristic of these monsters is the fact that they are mannequins; they are objects--symbols of James' attitude toward all women. James encounters another creature that can best be described as a bed-monster. Undoubtedly it is interpreted differently by different people, but it has clear overtones of birth trauma and confused sexuality. In Angela's interpretation, the monster may be her father looming over her. To James, it may be a bedridden Mary; it resembles Maria in her final form, engaged in a bed frame. The other monster is Pyramid Head, the horrific version of an executioner from the town's past (indicated by a portrait in the Historical Society). Pyramid Head is only 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 where he dealt with Mary's sickness. The real nightmare began here; hospitals symbolize many things, such as birth, death, sickness, trauma, and pain. James deals with these symbols similarly. He reenacts 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 hazy to dark after the hospital visit. Mary had begun lashing out at James, and James was helpless to heal his wife, or get back his life; he was caged, tormented by her sickness. After the hospital, James visits the Silent Hill Historical Society. The hole into which James descends takes him deep beneath the surface--both of Silent Hill and his psyche. He drops down a series of holes, symbolically going underneath layers of denial and getting to the root of his problem -- the root being Eddie, the manifestation of his denial. The journey down to meet Eddie takes James into an underground prison signifying his loss of freedom due to Mary's sickness. From the prison he drops down into a strange 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 execution of Eddie -- his denial -- leads James across the lake to the hotel, the final resting place of 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 Maria, the two tormenting figures in his journey.

In Silent Hill 2, the protagonist's premise -- what he learns from experience -- can take different form depending upon the player's choices. This adds interactive authenticity to the game play. What James is ultimately looking for -- his premise -- is not defined by only one outcome. The nice thing about this story is

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 James dispatches of Maria in the final battle, he is able to have one last conversation with Mary 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 forgiving him. This ending is obtained when the player spends little time with Maria running 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 faces off against Maria disguised as an unforgiving Mary, driving him to choose going home with 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 coughing in the end the same way Mary was, signifying that James is doomed to repeat his fate. Last is the "in water" ending, obtained by keeping James in poor health (not healing his wounds) and paying attention to the depressing items found during the journey, such as Angela's knife and the suicidal entry on 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.

Relative to storytelling 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 himself. 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 for him/herself what the meaning of the town is. This increases player immersion, giving complex 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 text items that speak of things related to the town, including Angela's past and a mental patient's ramblings. There 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. But you might be heading to a different place than Mary, James." Is the town judging James? Or is he 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. James remains too calm through the whole ordeal. This is inconsistent with all the assumptions of the story. The further along James gets in the story the more doubtful he becomes of his memory, so James should be at least mildly alarmed by what is going on around him. If James were more reactive and psychologically distressed during game play, we could witness the toll Silent Hill takes on James, as opposed to infer from his surroundings.

Highlight

When James finds Maria behind prison bars in the labyrinth, Maria begins speaking with 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?" "I'm not your Mary," she starkly replies. "It doesn't matter who I am. I'm here for you James. See? I'm 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 psychologically. This scene gives you a really good idea that something about Maria is off and 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 character, yet 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 complexity of this narrative, he states, "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 town of Silent Hill is in white fog, James' actual nature and motivations are highly open to 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's 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. The focus is not on his finding of the truth, but of the journey he takes to reach the truth. 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 monsters) that we get a better understanding of who James really is. Without Angela, we could never see 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 Historical Society. The monsters complement the atmosphere and resonate with James' psyche, 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.