

# Game Narrative Review

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**Game Title:** Heavy Rain

**Platform:** PS3

**Genre:** Adventure/Interactive Drama

**Release Date:** February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2010

**Developer:** Quantic Dream

**Publisher:** Sony

**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** David Cage

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## Overview

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Heavy Rain is psychological thriller that focuses on the efforts of four protagonists as they try to discover the identity of a serial killer known as the Origami Killer, capture him, and save the life of Shaun Mars, a child that he has abducted. The entire game takes place within the modern world and while the characters encounter extreme situations, their actions are all heavily grounded in reality. The game is broken into chapters where the player controls one character at a time unraveling parts of the story and driving the narrative forward along many different possible paths and outcomes.

Players control characters from a third-person point of view and interact with the game-world through the use of innovative, contextually positioned, real-time interactive prompts. All of the interactive mechanics deepen the connection between the actions characters take in the game-world and how those actions are completed in the real world. The player's actions not only control whether they succeed in their goals or, in many cases, die trying, but they also control the character's personalities and their perceptions of others. Heavy Rain is a game that is squarely focused on delivering a compelling, interactive experience to emotionally engage a player through its strong narrative and innovative interactive systems.

## Characters

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The player controls one of the game's four main characters during each chapter and switches back and forth between them through the majority of the narrative.

### NOTE:

- Towards the end of the game, the player discovers that one of the main characters, Scott Shelby, is actually the Origami Killer. However, the game portrays Scott Shelby and the Origami Killer as separate characters through the majority of the narrative so it feels accurate to give them separate character descriptions in this section.

### **Main Characters (Playable):**

- Ethan Mars – He was once a successful architect living an idyllic life in an American suburb with his wife Grace Mars and his two sons, Jason and Shaun. Early in the game, Ethan loses track of his son Jason in a crowded

mall and Jason is killed after getting hit by a car despite Ethan throwing himself in front of the vehicle. After recovering from coma after six-months his family life is destroyed. The game picks up again two years after Jason's death and Ethan is psychologically scarred and clearly depressed. He lives alone and has joint custody over Shaun with his wife but due to his semi-frequent blackouts, the Origami Killer kidnaps his son and forces Ethan to complete increasingly dangerous and twisted trials to find and save him before he drowns, trapped in a well that is slowly filling up with rainwater. He also becomes the police's primary suspect in the Origami Killer case and is befriended and helped by Madison Paige at many points in the game. He is always portrayed to the player as a good man who feels strongly about his son and will put himself through extreme physical and psychological situations to save him. His ragged psychological state is emphasized by his grungy looking clothes and perpetual five o'clock shadow.

- Scott Shelby – A middle-aged private investigator who has been hired by the families of the victims of the Origami Killer to help find the killer and bring him to justice. Although he is a larger man, somewhat out of shape and suffers from asthma, he also proves himself as an experienced fighter. He is a street-smart investigator who also has a protective side, evident in his interactions with a prostitute-turned-partner, Lauren. He is portrayed as having a concrete set of morals through his interactions with the corrupt businessman Kramer as he, on many occasions, turns down bribes and other illegal offers.
- Norman Jayden – A FBI profiler sent to work in conjunction with local police in hopes of capturing the Origami Killer. He is a younger man who is intelligent and analytically minded. He uses a futuristic set of glasses (Added Reality Interface or ARI) to sort through evidence and complete forensic work at crime scenes. Although he comes across as a stable, levelheaded individual, he is also addicted to a cocaine-like substance called triptocaine that, if abused, could permanently damage his brain. He is a good-hearted individual that genuinely cares about saving the life of Shaun Mars.
- Madison Paige – A young, intelligent, and beautiful journalist who also suffers from unexplained insomnia and nightmares. She is willing to take great risks to figure out the identity of the Origami Killer as she is interested in writing a book about the case. However, through helping Ethan Mars complete his trials and elude the police she eventually starts to come to love and care about him deeply. She is strong willed, confident, and a risk-taker that often finds herself in dangerous situations she did not anticipate. Nevertheless, she is a resourceful individual that can always find novel ways to get out of said situations. Her rebelliousness is personified in the motorcycle she uses to travel across town.
- The Origami Killer – The game's primary antagonist who is a serial killer that kills young boys by drowning them in rainwater. Profiled by Jayden as a middle aged, intelligent, white male, who is a former police officer looking for a suitable father figure. From 2009 to 2011 he is suspected in the

abduction and murder of eight young boys, between the ages of 9 and 13. After abducting children, he sends the father clues that will allow the father to gain information on the whereabouts of his son if they engage in a series of five trials to prove their worth as father figures. His mother instilled in him a love for both orchids and origami figures at a young age and these items are always found on the body of his victims.

Although the four main characters are the primary focus in the game, many minor characters play significant roles through the course of the narrative and, at least, three of them, deserve to be mentioned due to the importance they play further defining the characteristics of the four main characters.

### **Minor Characters:**

- Lauren Winter – A prostitute who's son, Johnny Winter, was killed by the Origami Killer, is approached by Scott Shelby at the beginning of the game to talk about her son's murder. She suffers from depression and harbors great anger at the origami killer for killing her son. After she convinces Scott that they should work together, she is shown to be intelligent and quick-witted in helping Scott track down evidence on the Origami Killer. Her interactions with Scott and Scott's protectiveness and warm-hearted behavior towards her help characterize Scott as a good-hearted and morally sound individual.
- Shaun Mars – The son of Ethan and Grace, he appears to be traumatized by his brother's death. He is emotionally removed from his father and other people, he doesn't like to talk to anyone, and must be encouraged to play and act like a normal child his age. His primary desire is to have his entire family back together. His characterization is utilized to increase the player's feelings of protectiveness for him and empathize with Ethan's own goals and desires.
- Lt. Carter Blake – The primary foil for Norman Jayden, Lt. Carter Blake is a cantankerous detective who has worked on the Origami Killer case for some length of time. He constantly disregards police protocol, and acts in a brash and aggressive manner frequently roughing up subjects and doing whatever it takes to get an answer as quickly as possible. He seems frustrated with the case and jumps at opportunities to accuse likely subjects without sufficient evidence. He has a strong personality and his extreme actions force the player to mold Jayden into a person who has a similar demeanor or someone who is more peaceful, intelligent, and kind.

## **Breakdown**

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The overall quality of Heavy Rain's story is excellent and is truly driven by its well-written characters and their feelings and motivations. While all of the characters generally fit into a number of stereotypical character tropes, their flaws and often conflicted emotional states give them a sense of depth and realism not found in most videogames and many movies. Moreover, all of the interactive mechanics used in Heavy Rain are implemented to heighten player immersion and help evoke emotional responses in the player.

Every action the player takes in the game fundamentally drives the direction of the narrative down different paths both in regards to defining the personalities of the characters and determining the outcome of the game. These interactive mechanics can be broken down into interactions with a character's state of mind, interactions with other characters in the game, and interactions with the game-world.

Players are often able to query the thoughts of the character they are controlling which, in turn, both helps the player remain focused on the task at hand and gives them insight into different ways this character might approach a situation. Selecting character dialogue operates in a similar manner, however, to maintain the realistic flow of natural dialogue, a default selection is chosen by the game if a player does not make a choice within a limited set of time. These dialogue options allow the player to choose how they want the character to respond to a situation rather than determining exactly what they want the character to say. These mechanics help keep the player focused on the character's state-of-mind and it helps create a believable, real world the player can understand and relate to. These aspects of the game are further emphasized and supported by the mechanics that define how a player controls a character's interactions with the game-world.

Heavy Rain allows players to complete an extremely broad set of interactions with other characters and objects by closely tying the character's on-screen physical action with a relatively similar player movement. A character dries themselves with a towel when a player shakes the controller from side to side, opens a door towards themselves when a player pulls down on the right analog stick, or throws something with their right hand when the player makes a smooth quarter turn to the right and up. Moreover, as a character navigates an environment, contextually placed interaction prompts appear when the character is relatively close to an interactable-object and is looking in that direction. Finally, all of these on-screen prompts start to jitter and appear blurry when the character is nervous, frightened, or on edge. This helps induce a similar state of mind in the player as making actions becomes more difficult due to these UI effects. The more action-oriented moments in the game utilize the UI in a different, but equally immersive manner.

Intense, action-oriented sequences are driven through the use of contextually placed QTEs which allow the player to follow and affect the outcome of a sequence without losing focus on the content of the scene. For example, if a player has to run over ice, circles with R1 and L1 will appear over the right and left feet of the character and if the player hits these buttons within a certain frame of time, the character will successfully traverse the ice but if they don't, the action sequence will continue to unfold in a different manner.

All of these interactive elements reinforce the player's connection with the story and the characters, which makes uncovering the story a more meaningful and

emotionally powerful journey. All of the interactive elements genuinely support the storytelling experience regardless of whether the scene is expository, an inciting incident, the climax, or any other structural aspect of a narrative.

The story structure of the entire game is rather deftly put together considering the four interwoven story lines and all of the forked paths the player can take to change the direction of the game's narrative. David Cage employs a technique he calls *bending stories* that allows him to create a strong cohesive story while still providing the player with significant choice in the direction of the narrative.

For example, at the beginning of the game, Scott Shelby arrives at Lauren's apartment to ask her questions about her son's death. While they are talking, the player is able to control the actions of Scott as he moves around the room. There are many different seating, standing, or leaning positions that the player can choose to take as the conversation unfolds. If the player chooses to sit on the bed, near Lauren and choose more comforting dialogue options, the scene takes on a warmer tone and Scott seems like a kinder, compassionate individual. If the player, instead, chooses to walk around the room, search for clues or lean against the wall and talks to her in a sterner tone, the scene and Scott's character, feel very different. Regardless of the player's actions, the scene, in relation to its affect on the rest of the story, can potentially end the same, but the player will come away with a very different opinion of Scott, Lauren, and their relationship to each other. David Cage even allows major characters to die well before the end of the game has been reached without completely ruining the story the player has created.

If a character dies, their death has a major effect on the rest of the game the player will experience but it does not derail the narrative. There are literally zero "game over" screens in the entire game and the player is never asked to replay a section due to "misplayed" QTEs. In fact, they are encouraged to continue playing through the use of a strict save game system and various trophy awards for what would normally be considered failed objectives. I would argue that this technique has a high chance of making the conclusion less meaningful because the player has less time to become attached to the character since that character's playable sections cannot be accessed if they are dead. However, if the player has already formed an emotional attachment with the character that has died, the ending still has a great chance to be emotionally engaging. It was undoubtedly a bold move and, while it may not be perfect, it is a fantastic experiment that I applaud David Cage for taking.

## Strongest Element

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The strongest element of the game's tight coupling of story and interaction is its ability to generate varied emotional responses in players by allowing them to make important decisions in realistic portrayed adult situations. I smiled broad and wide and thought about what joy it must be to be a father as I controlled Ethan play with both of his sons at the beginning of the game. After applying lipstick, eyeliner and ripping a skirt so that Madison Paige would look sexier in an

attempt to woo Paco, a creepy nightclub owner, I felt truly disgusted as I was forced to strip at gun point and then angry, relieved, and happy when I was able to knock him out with a lamp and not forced to debase Madison further. When asked to choose between killing a man and potentially saving Ethan's son, I almost immediately pulled the trigger, killing him instantly and as Ethan fell to the floor vomiting, I couldn't stop thinking about how quickly I made that decision and whether I would make the same decision in real life. Controlling and responding to these well rounded, flawed characters in extreme, realistic situations evoked emotions I have never felt while playing a videogame and helped me learn something about myself, which is truly an achievement for any story, in any medium.

## Unsuccessful Element

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The single most unsuccessful element in the game is the treatment of Scott Shelby after he is revealed as the Origami Killer as it is an example of both poor storytelling and a missed opportunity for emotionally powerful gameplay. The player does not get to control him after the revelation and he only has a couple lines of dialogue with Madison and a small, unnecessary conversation with Ethan before he rescues his son. Although watching the character act after his true nature is revealed could have been powerful, it is nothing compared to the emotions that would have been generated if the player was able to control Scott after they found out he was the killer. Even if the player controlled him simply walking down the street, the emotions that would have been generated would have made those small interactive moments worthwhile. As it stands, after revealing he is the killer, no further characterization is attempted and the character, as a whole, feels flat and the connection between Scott and the Origami Killer feels contrived. The script and direction didn't fulfill the promise these two characters showed by letting go too early and not including any meaningful interactions with Scott after he is revealed to be the killer.

## Highlight

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At the beginning of the game, I controlled Ethan Mars as he lives the idyllic life with his wife and two kids in their beautiful suburban home. Ethan goes outside to play with both of his sons before the family has a birthday dinner for one of the boys. I am forced to choose who I want to play with first and I choose Shaun. I lift him up onto my shoulders and using the six-axis motion controls I move through the yard as if I was an airplane. I cannot remember the last time I had such a big, wholesome smile on my face playing a videogame. After I set him down, I start to play-sword-fight with Jason. It is a QTE where I succeed in hitting him, in a playful manner, when I successfully hit the prompted button before a short amount of time elapses. As I am playing with this boy, I start to miss the QTEs just to see him succeed, and I very quickly lose all interest in "winning" this fake fight. Seeing him win feels better. It feels right and for a moment I realize, I think I know what a father feels when he plays with his sons. I am astonished but completely engaged and, shortly thereafter, when I lose Jason in a mall and he dies trying to cross a street to reach me, I feel terrible. After that moment, I became attached to Ethan and his surviving son Shaun in a truly meaningful

manner and since all Ethan's actions after that were an attempt to save his remaining son, it helped make his entire journey an emotional experience for me. Moreover, this entire prequel experience was the end of the game's introductory tutorial which is a phenomenal example of just how well Heavy Rain ties the interactive elements of the game with its narrative content.

## Critical Reception

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Critical reception of the game has been overwhelming positive. Most reviews have given the game 90+ scores praising the game's ability to tell an emotional, character-driven story while delivering a genuinely new interactive experience.

Gamepro lauded the game with a 100 and stated "An emotionally engaging thrill-ride from start to finish, Quantic Dream's Heavy Rain is a superbly crafted interactive experience, told expertly through its stunning visuals and believable characters." 1UP summed up the experience by stating it was "one of the most emotional experiences I've ever had playing a videogame" and rewarded it a 91. However, detractors commented on how the game felt uneven and the story felt weak for a game so focused on delivering an amazing narrative experience.

Destructoid, awarding it a 70, lamenting that "ultimately, Heavy Rain is an experiment that both succeeded and failed, when it could easily have been a total success if the brains behind it weren't trying so hard to be smart, and cared more about providing a sensible plot as opposed to a shocking one."

It currently has a Metacritic score of 87 based on 104 critic reviews.

## Lessons

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- Fleshing out a character's backstory and imbuing them with realistic flaws the player can understand and believe help make what would otherwise be stereotypical characters feel intriguing and real
  - Madison Paige, while a beautiful, young, and intelligent journalist, also happens to suffer from insomnia and nightmares and has learned that she can only consistently fall asleep at motels. Her flaws help make her feel special, interesting, and unique which makes the player immediately more interested in her story and motivations.
- Associating on-screen character actions with the player's movements increases their feeling of immersion and control
  - A player needs to pull backwards on the right analog stick to open doors or shake the controller to the right and left to dry a character using a towel. In other games, these actions would have been completed by pressing one of the face buttons but Heavy Rain's interactive mechanic helps tie player actions more closely to the characters they control which, in turn, enables them to more readily empathize with the character's plight and become engrossed in their story.

- Binding character interactions to real-world restrictions gives the game a feeling of realism that further strengthens the entire narrative, making it easier for players to immerse themselves in the game-world
  - When a character enters a room, they will only be able to wash their face, for example, if that character is physically near the faucet and is looking in that direction. Moreover, all dialogue choices must be chosen within a discreet time limit or a default selection will be made, as real-world conversations do not simply stop for an indefinite amount of time to allow one person to think. This attention to realism makes the entire game-world feel more believable and coherent which makes it easier for players to relate to the game's characters and the situations they experience.
- Utilizing the User Interface to reflect a character's psychological and physical state is an effective method of tying the player's state-of-mind with the character they are controlling
  - When Madison escapes from a locked room and emerges into an apartment that has been set on fire, any interactive prompt that is displayed is blurry and shakes violently on the screen which makes players feel similar to Madison's state-of-mind: nervous, worried, and potentially scared.
- Videogames can tackle adult subject matter in a tasteful manner
  - Madison is forced to strip in front of a seedy club owner and the sensation of having to take off clothes in front of that disgusting character was repulsive which made her triumph over him that much more rewarding. Madison's sexuality was not used to titillate or show the player how "hot" she looks. It was used to evoke a specific response in the player and move the story forward in an interesting, unique manner.
- Videogames can be used to evoke emotions that are not related to overcoming odds, competition, or fantasy fulfillment; games can be entertaining without being "fun"
  - When Ethan Mars is forced to consider whether he would drink poison that would kill him but potentially give him enough time to save his son, I not only felt the dread that he felt but I was also filled with conflicting desires to protect both of their lives. These emotions were complicated and made me consider my own stance on the moral issues central to this type of decision. It did not feel "fun", but it was engaging, exciting, and I enjoyed myself immensely.
- Removing the classic videogame notion of "failure" makes player decisions more meaningful and significant while reducing the player's focus on the "narrative as part of a game" and emphasizing the narrative as meaningful on in its own

- All of a player's actions are considered important and meaningful since every single action moves the narrative forward, regardless of whether they successfully completed all of the QTE prompts in an action scene or made a specific dialogue choice. Moreover, by removing some of the experience's "gaminess", the player isn't focused on getting the "best" ending because all endings are potentially meaningful and interesting which emphasizes the story the player is creating as the most important element of the experience.
- Surprising revelations about an important character in a game that change the player's opinion of that character and make them question every action taken until that point in the narrative must be followed up and supported by additional characterization or the revelation feels cheap and gimmicky
  - The revelation that Scott was the Origami Killer occurred at the very end of the game and felt cheap because the player had only a few short interactions with him that failed to resolve the player's conflicted views of this character as he had been portrayed as a completely different person through the majority of the game.

## Summation

Heavy Rain is a game that actually evokes meaningful emotions rarely evoked by videogames. I felt genuinely sad, uncomfortable, compassionate, and protective for the game's modern, realistically portrayed characters. Moreover, it tastefully includes mature subject matter and subjects such as nudity and morally difficult decisions more effectively than any other interactive work I have ever experienced. It successfully accomplishes these difficult tasks by tightly weaving the player's interactions with the narrative experience and taking every opportunity to connect the player with the minds of the characters, their motivations, and their goals. Moreover, through its critical and commercial acclaim, it manages to prove to the world that players want videogames that aren't extended action scenes, sports simulations, or hours upon hours of teenage fantasy fulfillment. Although Heavy Rain is an innovative, narrative-rich interactive experience that engages the player similar to how more mature entertainment mediums operate, its true value may lie in what it potentially holds for the future of videogame.

## Works Cited:

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