

# Game Narrative Review

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**Game Title: THE LEGACY OF  
KAIN: SOUL REAVER 2**

**Platform:** PC, Playstation 2

**Genre:** Action Adventure

**Release Date:** November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2001

**Developer:** Crystal Dynamics

**Publisher:** Eidos Interactive

**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** Amy Henning, Paul Jenkins,  
Kurt Harland, Richard Lemarchand

## Overview

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A broken, fantasy world, a twice-dead protagonist, and a cataclysm, fuelled by a time-travel induced paradox combine together to bring us *Soul Reaver 2* – the third game in the widely acclaimed *Legacy of Kain* series. Bringing back the unique “shifting” based dual-world gameplay first introduced in its predecessor, *Soul Reaver 2* continues the story of Raziel, a vampiric wraith whose quest for answers take him on a journey across time itself.

Continuing the tradition set up by previous games in the series, *Soul Reaver 2* utilizes masterfully written dialogue, delivered by voice acting legends like Michael Bell, Simon Templeman and the late Tony Jay, to deliver the bulk of its narrative. This focus on voice-acting, together with the game’s multi-layered theme of death, rebirth, fatalism, and free-will<sup>[1]</sup>, made the game stand out amidst its contemporaries to such an extent that it is still hailed as an exemplary specimen of good narrative design in video games to this day.

## Characters

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→ **Raziel:** The player character for the *Soul Reaver* branch of *The Legacy of Kain* series, Raziel is a vampiric, spectral entity whose history is as convoluted and twisted as the spectral realm he now calls “home.” A former vampire hunting human priest, Raziel was raised into undeath by Kain, the enigmatic vampire-Guardian of Balance, to serve as his first lieutenant. “Resurrected” partially because of the “passion”<sup>[2]</sup> he showed in life and partially as an insult to the vampire-hunting Sarafan order Raziel formerly served, Kain’s “first-born”, nevertheless, served him with unquestioning loyalty for a millennia. Their symbiotic relationship, however, came to an end when Raziel “transgressed” by evolving ahead of his patriarch and growing a pair of bat-like wings. Kain, in a supposed fit of jealousy, ripped Raziel’s new found wings from his back before ordering his “brothers” to cast their fallen sibling into the Lake of the Dead. There, Raziel burned for millennia before finally awaking as a semi-corporeal soul-eating phantom in the den of a Cthullu-esque monstrosity. While *Soul Reaver* dealt primarily with Raziel’s quest for vengeance, its sequel puts more emphasis on the protagonist’s quest for answers. Why is Raziel still alive? Why did Kane cast him into the Lake? What are the true intentions of Raziel’s new eldritch “master”? All these questions are systematically answered over the course of the game.

- **Kain** : While Raziel may be the protagonist of *Soul Reaver* and its sequel, the vampire Kain is the undisputed main character of the series as a whole. Retroactively mirroring his “protégé’s” own journey, Kain’s story starts with his own brutal murder and resurrection. Like Raziel, Kain, too, is driven initially by a sense of vengeance before getting caught up in a conspiracy that spans time, space and reality itself. However, their similarities end here. Whereas Raziel is noble, altruistic, and more than a little naive, Kain is ambitious, pragmatic and morally ambiguous. Being the eldest living vampire by the time of *Soul Reaver*, Kain is tremendously powerful to the extent that his “children” consider him a deity<sup>[2]</sup>. Yet the most powerful weapon in Kain’s arsenal is not his nigh limitless telekinesis or vampiric intangibility. It is his unnaturally keen wit and deep insight that have kept Kain on top of things over the many, many millennia. Not for naught is he the Vampiric Overlord of the entire world of Nosgoth at the start of the game
- **The Elder “god”**: A Lovecraftian entity that lives at the bottom of the Lake of the Dead, the Elder “god” is the self-proclaimed deity of the Cycle of Life as well as Raziel’s “benefactor.” He claims to be responsible for Raziel’s second resurrection and proclaims Raziel his “soul reaver” – his personal “angel of death”<sup>[2]</sup>. But how truthful is the Elder “god” being? Is he truly the deity he claims to be? Or is he a mere parasite; an eldritch abomination using Raziel’s unique gift to further his own nefarious ends?
- **The Soul Reaver**: Though not a character in the traditional sense of the word, the semi-sentient, spirit-devouring great-sword deserves to be mentioned in the

characters page just because of the importance it has on the plot. From the nature of its paradoxical existence to the true identity of the spirit trapped in the blade – every aspect of the Soul Reaver serves to push the narrative forward.

## Breakdown

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Whereas the first two *Legacy of Kain* games dealt primarily with the theme of duality and balance, Soul Reaver 2 greatly expands on the series' metaphoric horizons by tackling a wider range of philosophic, psychological and moral issues. Much of this is due to the increased emphasis on time travel in this game compared to its predecessors. While *Blood Omen: Legacy of Kain* deconstructed the concept of using time travel to fix an issue, Soul Reaver 2 expands on it by introducing the concept of a time paradox – an anomaly in the time-stream than can spontaneously and radically alter the time line by merely existing.

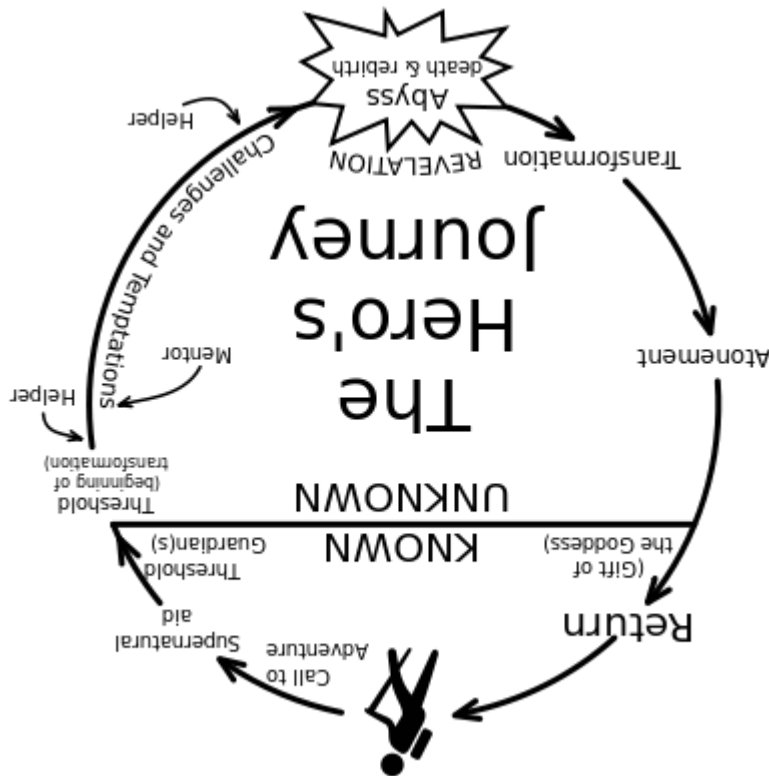
“History abhors a paradox” serves as the arc-words of the series as a whole and never has the phrase made more sense than in Soul Reaver 2. “Free will is an illusion”<sup>[2]</sup>, Kain proclaims in the opening segment of the game, introducing the futile nature of man's struggle against fate. But right after stating the fact, as if to deconstruct his own thesis, Kain attempts to flee through a Time Portal – something which, according to his own explanation, would lead to nothing except and endless loop with the added prospective of introducing a fatal Time Paradox. However, by the end of the game's narrative, it seems that creating a Paradox was Kain's master plan all along. Indeed, to the enlightened, having two instances of the same object occupying the same point in

time is the only logical way to defy the inevitability of Fate, as it is depicted in the world of Nosgoth.

Adding weight to this extremely deep, meta-philosophical tale of (undead) man versus fate is the brilliantly written dialog. The eloquently expressive way in which Raziel describes every new environment he enters provides a massive amount of lore while, simultaneously, fleshing out his own character and providing subtle gameplay hints. So articulate is the dialogue in Soul Reaver 2 that anyone without extensive training in classical or Shakespearean theatre would make the conversations sound unnerving at best and downright gaudy in most instances. However, classically trained voice actors are exactly what Crystal Dynamics hired and the results give Soul Reaver 2 its unique brand of narrative expressionism. The game has been called a text-book example of “video game prose”<sup>[4]</sup> and only a few hours of gameplay is needed to ascertain the truth of this statement.

Being a sequel means some knowledge of Soul Reaver 2’s predecessor’s narrative is needed to fully enjoy the game. However, instead of using the original Soul Reaver or Blood Omen as an excuse to not disclose plot exposition, Soul Reaver 2 uses its own gameplay mechanics and time-travel based narrative to provide a new spin on established characters. E.g. Players who play played Blood Omen would remember and recognize Moebius, the manipulative Guardian of Time, but both new and old players alike will enjoy his brand new schemes and personality which subtly delivers exposition to bring neophyte players into the loop.

The secondary theme of Soul Reaver 2 can be considered to be the Ourboros, the snake eating its own tail. Raziel's journey can be thought of as an upside down version of Joseph Campbell's widely acclaimed concept of a "monomyth" or "hero's journey"<sup>[5]</sup>.



Raziel's journey takes him across three different time lines in an attempt to find the right answers, yet, in the end he finds that the answers were at his journey's philosophical start all along. Raziel's exploits are the cause of his downfall and, in trying to find the answers, he dooms himself once again. Only the timely intervention of Kain saves Raziel from oblivion. In end, paradoxically enough, Raziel's hated foe would be his ultimate savior.

## **Strongest Element**

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The dialog is, unanimously, Soul Reaver 2's greatest element. The sheer power and emotion the actors put behind every single enunciation transform the dialogue from being "merely" excellent to being a cult classic. The greatest examples of the weight of the game's dialogue can be found in every single conversation between Raziel and his "father", Kain. From the deconstruction of the concept of altruism, fatalism and revenge in general to discussing what can only be described as quantum meta-physical immortality; Raziel and Kain's "bonding" moments are definitely amongst the best parts of the game.

## **Unsuccessful Element**

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The pacing of the game towards the 2<sup>nd</sup> third of the game, combined with a radical decrease in the narrative-to-gameplay ratio made the middle part of the game a dull sequence of unexplained, irrelevant puzzle solving and repetitive platforming. The lack of traditional save game mechanics, introduced to increase immersion, exaggerated the problem to such an extent that the game became a mind numbingly frustrating. A large part of this is simply because of the amount of backtracking required to access one of the only 6 or so "Soul Shrines" (basically stationary save game points) spread out across Nosgoth after solving every minor puzzle.



## Highlight

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The confrontation with Janos Audron and the sequence following it is the definite peak of the game. After a grueling gauntlet that involved Raziel battling the (literal) demons of Nosgoth's dark future in his search for answers, our protagonist finally arrives at the Mountain Retreat of the last Winged Vampire – intact, in this timeline, for the first time in 12+ hours of gameplay. The platforming puzzle that follows gives the player a definite sense of “rising” against fate to reach his destiny. And, after finally, meeting Janos, the only person in the entire series to express genuine affection towards Raziel and seeing him tragically murdered by Raziel's idolized, former human-self is simply world shattering. The resulting rampage of revenge, as Raziel renounces his humanity once and for all, is satisfying beyond belief.



“I renounce you.”<sup>[2]</sup>

## Critical Reception

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Metacritic and GameRankings gave Soul Reaver 2 a score of 80/100<sup>[6]</sup> and 80.7% respectively<sup>[7]</sup>, praising its brilliant story telling but criticizing its pacing and lack of replayability compared to its predecessors.

IGN's Doug Perry, on the other hand, gave the game a 9.0<sup>[8]</sup> greatly praising its unique narrative and the interactions between Kain and Raziel; highlighting them as the epitome of the game's dialog based narrative.

## Lessons

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- **Lesson 1: Dialog is important!**
  - Never before has any game emphasized the positive impact of good dialog in a game like the Soul Reaver 2. The extremely well written script, coupled with the delivery of lines, combine together to form a cohesive, symbiotic relationship that takes the game to greater heights!
- **Lesson 2: Good storytelling techniques can overcome traditionally “weak” story concepts.**
  - Before Legacy of Kain, no one would have believed you if you said a story about time travelling vampires with elemental powers could have one of the most innovative thought provoking storylines in gaming history. The sheer quality of the game's writing makes it ascend from the

“vampire fiction” genre into literature’s greatest hits with its head raised high!

- **Lesson 3: Pacing should be consistent.**

- Most of the reviews of the game criticize the pacing of the game and its most apparent at the middle of the game when Raziel must gain elemental powers. The lack of narrative insight behind it turns some of the most potentially interesting locations in the game into a dull, sludge-fest.

## **Summation**

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To this day, Soul Reaver 2 remains one of the most sophisticated pieces of video game prose in existence. This is the game that turned the Soul Reaver franchise from a darkly beautiful, gothic video game into a darkly beautiful, gothic video game that dug deep into complex philosophical issues while presenting several ways to resolve them. Anyone who plays the game definitely comes out it with a deeper insight on so many varied, different subjects that it is almost crazy to imagine. This is a game that definitely makes its player smarter and, with the current state of the franchise hanging on the fringe of uncertainty, the game design community is set to lose one of its most intellectual properties. Contemporary and future video game aficionados can only hope that, one day, Raziel and Kain would once again rise out of the ashes with the Soul Reaver held up high – ready to enlighten a new generation of gamers and designers alike.

## Sources

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