

# Game Narrative Review

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**Game Title:** Heavy Rain

**Platform:** PS3

**Genre:** Action-Adventure & Interactive Psychological Thriller

**Release Date:** February 23, 2010

**Developer:** Quantic Dream

**Publisher:** Sony

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

## Overview

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In the interactive psychological thriller *Heavy Rain*, the player drives the narrative through the third-person perspectives of four distinct playable characters who are all fiercely determined to find the answer to the same troubling question: *who is the Origami Killer?* For over two years, the Origami Killer has been systematically kidnapping young boys from an unspecified modern city, drowning them in rainwater, and abandoning their bodies within five days of their abduction. Despite the brutality of these actions, the Origami Killer also creates tender yet provocative tableaux with his victims' bodies, placing an orchid on their chests and a carefully-crafted origami figure in their hands. Unfortunately for one of the playable characters, Ethan Mars, the Origami Killer's latest kidnapping victim is Ethan's son, Shaun. With the help of the three other main characters – a tenacious journalist, a well-educated FBI agent, and a sympathetic private detective – Ethan fights against time and his fears in order to show the Origami Killer just how far he will go to save his son.

In addition to working together to find the Origami Killer, the four playable characters also must each confront demons of their own, ranging from agoraphobia to substance abuse. The player decides the fate of each of the four characters through their conversation and action selections as well as their ability to successfully perform quick-time events (henceforth written as "QTEs"). However, each character's skills and options are affected by their mental illnesses, phobias, and addictions, so no single character can capture the Origami Killer on their own; those who try to do so sometimes die in the process. In fact, this psychological thriller has over 15 possible endings, many of which result in the deaths of some or all of the playable characters. Thankfully, each playable character offers a unique skillset, personality, and range of experiences that, when combined with those of the other characters, can potentially lead to Shaun's rescue, keep everyone alive, and bring the Origami Killer to justice.

Ultimately, the Origami Killer yearns to find a father who can prove that he will go to any length to rescue his son. In order to find such a father, the Origami Killer forces the fathers of his victims to go through five arduous trials, each marked by a clue written on a symbolic origami figure. During one of the five trials, the Origami Killer sends Ethan a haunting message that summarizes the ultimate underlying conceit that drives the narrative in *Heavy Rain*:

*"How far will you go to save someone you love?"*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are taken directly from spoken or written dialogue from *Heavy Rain*.

# Characters

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- **The Mars Family**

1. **Ethan Mars**

*“No one's gonna stop me from saving my son.”*

Ethan is one of four playable characters, the ex-husband of Grace Mars, and the father of two boys: the deceased Jason, and Shaun, the boy who was most recently kidnapped by the Origami Killer. Struggling with blackouts, agoraphobia, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after losing Jason due to his own negligence, Ethan must endure five physically- and psychologically-taxing trials in order to prove to the Origami Killer that he deserves to be reunited with Shaun. While he is an accomplished architect and a good-hearted man, Ethan's personality and ultimate fate are determined by the way that he interacts with the world and others, the actions he chooses to take, and his ability to successfully decipher the Origami Killer's cryptic clues. The pressure to complete the Origami Killer's trials compounded by his psychological issues make Ethan behave so strangely that law enforcement eventually deems him a suspect in the Origami Killer case. If he hopes to save Shaun, he will need patience, fortitude, and the expertise of the three other playable characters.

2. **Grace Mars**

*“Wasn't it enough, losing Jason?! ...I'm sorry. That's not what I meant to say... I miss him so much...”*

Grace is Ethan's ex-wife, a homemaker, and the mother of Jason and Shaun Mars. Prior to Jason's accidental death, Grace was a devoted and cheerful wife and mother, but her marriage could not withstand the turmoil of losing a child. She divorced Ethan, became prone to emotional outbursts, and lost faith in Ethan's ability to be a reliable caregiver. She maintains joint custody of Shaun, and she is devastated when Ethan loses Shaun in a park during one of Ethan's blackouts. Weary of her ex-husband's endless excuses and erratic behavior, Grace eventually begins to suspect that Ethan is actually the Origami Killer.

3. **Jason Mars**

*“Am I grown up now?”*

Jason was the eldest son of Ethan and Grace Mars. He was a happy and adventurous child who enjoyed playing with his younger brother Shaun, but it was Jason's curiosity that led to his unfortunate demise. Two years prior to the events of *Heavy Rain*, 10-year-old Jason wandered out of his father's care and was hit by a car. While Ethan dove in front of the car to try to save his son, Jason still unfortunately died in the accident. The Origami Killer witnessed this tragic event, and, because he was so impressed by Ethan's willingness to sacrifice himself for Jason, the Origami Killer eventually decided to kidnap Shaun and subject Ethan to the five trials so as to verify his dedication, setting the events of *Heavy Rain* into motion.

4. **Shaun Mars**

*“You know, Dad, what happened to Jason wasn't your fault.”*

Shaun is the youngest son of Ethan and Grace Mars and the Origami Killer's latest kidnapping victim. He was close with his brother, and although he has suffered from persistent depression since Jason's death and his parents' subsequent divorce, he still loves and supports his father. While rescuing Shaun is the ultimate goal of *Heavy Rain*, Shaun is no simple MacGuffin; he is Ethan's reason to live and the future of the Mars family. In trying to save Shaun, Ethan is also trying to save himself and his family's legacy.

- **Investigators**

1. **Local Police**

1. **Lieutenant Carter Blake**

*“Think you can do a better fucking job than me with your psychology degree and your great glasses? That don't mean zip when it comes to getting out there. You're just a fucking bureaucrat!”*

Carter is the local police's lead investigator on the Origami Killer case, the aggressive and reluctant partner of FBI agent Norman Jayden, and the secondary antagonist in *Heavy Rain*. He resents the FBI's involvement in the investigation, and he values quick-thinking, instincts, and violence over logical analysis. Stubbornly ignoring Norman's detailed serial killer profile in favor of circumstantial evidence, Carter is convinced that Ethan is the Origami Killer.

2. **Federal Bureau of Investigation**

1. **Agent Norman Jayden**

*“I prefer to have all the information before I make a decision. I try to make rational choices when possible.”*

Norman is one of the four playable characters, a witty and intelligent serial killer profiler, and the FBI's lead investigator on the Origami Killer case. With the help of ARI (Added Reality Interface), a pair of augmented reality glasses that helps him detect and evaluate clues, Norman methodically searches crime scenes, interviews suspects, and eventually works to prove Ethan's innocence in order to find Shaun Mars. He has a laid-back sense of humor and does his best to cooperate with local police, but his partner in the Origami Killer case, local lieutenant Carter Blake, resents Norman's psychological training and technical advantages. Like the three other playable characters, Norman has a psychological issue with which he must contend: he is addicted to Triptocaine, a fictional drug that negates ARI's negative side effects but causes nosebleeds, dizziness, tremors, and eventually death if ingested too frequently. Norman must eventually decide what is more important – satisfying his Triptocaine addiction or finding Shaun Mars.

3. **Private Citizens**

1. **Scott Shelby/Scottie Sheppard (see also: THE ORIGAMI KILLER)**

*“I'm a private eye; there's nothing I can't do.”*

Scott is one of the four playable characters and poses as a private investigator who was hired by some of the Origami Killer's victims' families. He is presented in a sympathetic light as a champion of justice for the majority of the game, contending with asthma that sometimes interferes with his investigation. He feels a particular affection for the mothers of the victims, possibly because they remind him of his own grieving, overworked mother. Like the other three playable characters, Scott struggles with a psychological issue: after watching his brother Johnny drown due to their alcoholic father's inaction, Scott suffers from extreme PTSD that has unfortunately spiraled into homicidal behavior. Since he is secretly the Origami Killer, Scott's primary goal is to recover all of the clues he left behind, covering his tracks and reliving his

victims' pain. If Ethan, Madison, and Norman fail enough QTEs and make certain choices, they may never learn that Scott Shelby is in fact Scottie Sheppard, the Origami Killer.

## 2. **Madison Paige**

*"There's one kid left. There still might be time to save him. Let him go. Do what your father couldn't do."*

Madison is one of the four playable characters, is a determined photographer and journalist, and spends most of her time helping Ethan find the Origami Killer. Madison suffers from chronic insomnia that only abates when she sleeps in hotels. Her past is largely unknown, but she is thick-skinned and resilient while simultaneously showing sympathetic sensitivity to Ethan's trauma. She puts her reporting skills to the test by conducting research and interviews and uses her feminine wiles to obtain useful information. Madison also nurses Ethan back to health after some of his more physically-challenging trials, suggesting at least rudimentary training in first aid.

## • **The Origami Killer & Associated People**

### 1. **The Origami Killer (see also: SCOTT SHELBY)**

*"I've been looking for a long, long time, Ethan... Looking for a father that would be able to do what mine could not do: sacrifice himself in order to save his son. Oh, I searched, searched, and searched... And then, I remembered you."*

The Origami Killer is the game's primary antagonist, the captor of Shaun Mars, and the tormentor of Ethan Mars. He replicates his twin brother's slow, agonizing death by holding his male victims captive for 3-5 days in a well that steadily fills with rainwater. While he holds the boys captive, the Origami Killer also subjects his victims' fathers to five grueling trials that they must complete before the rainwater rises high enough to drown the victims, thereby proving that they are better fathers than his own. He sends clues to the fathers of his victims in the form of provocative recordings, cryptic messages, and hand-crafted origami figures (see also: **THE ORIGAMI FIGURES**). Prior to testing Ethan, the Origami Killer had already subjected eight other fathers to the trials; unfortunately, none of those fathers succeeded. As an apology for their fathers' ineptitude, he leaves an origami figure and an orchid with each of his victims' bodies. If Ethan, Norman, or Madison habitually fail enough QTEs or make certain choices, they may complete the game without saving Shaun or learning that the Origami Killer is in fact one of the playable characters, Scott Shelby.

### 2. **Origami Figures**

The Origami Killer makes several different origami figures throughout *Heavy Rain*, each of which serve as silent characters that are figurative extensions of the Origami Killer and his motivations. Cryptic written messages and digital recordings accompany five of the figures, directing Ethan to the dangerous tasks associated with each of the five trials. A different message with the same rhetorical structure is written directly onto each trial's origami figure; this structure transforms the origami messages into an oath that the Origami Killer is asking his victims' fathers to take so as to assert their worthiness as fathers:

***ARE YOU PREPARED TO SHOW YOUR COURAGE IN ORDER TO SAVE YOUR SON?  
ARE YOU PREPARED TO SUFFER TO SAVE YOUR SON  
ARE YOU PREPARED TO MAKE A SACRIFICE TO SAVE YOUR SON?  
ARE YOU PREPARED TO KILL SOMEONE TO SAVE YOUR SON?  
ARE YOU PREPARED TO GIVE YOUR LIFE TO SAVE YOUR SON'S?***

If Ethan fails a trial by missing too many QTEs, he receives fewer clues during subsequent trials and may die or otherwise fail to save Shaun.

## 1. The Five Trials

### 1. The Bear – Courage

*“ARE YOU PREPARED TO SHOW YOUR COURAGE IN ORDER TO SAVE YOUR SON?”*

The first trial of the five, the Bear Trial forces Ethan to confront his agoraphobia and PTSD by directing him to a locker in a crowded train station. Ethan then must drive a car four miles within a certain time limit – on the highway, in the rain, and against oncoming traffic. This origami figure evokes a fierce mother bear who will stop at nothing to protect her cub, which provides a parallel to Ethan’s determination to protect his son. The Bear is the only required trial, and Ethan may still save Shaun even if he fails it.

### 2. The Butterfly – Suffering

*“ARE YOU PREPARED TO SUFFER TO SAVE YOUR SON?”*

Set in an abandoned power station, the Butterfly Trial tests Ethan’s agility and pain tolerance. Ethan must gently crawl through broken glass and avoid being shocked too many times as he moves through the power station’s condensers. Butterflies are delicate creatures that represent both the beauty and the fragility of life, and Ethan must emulate their graceful movement in order to succeed.

### 3. The Lizard – Sacrifice

*“ARE YOU PREPARED TO MAKE A SACRIFICE TO SAVE YOUR SON?”*

The third of Ethan’s trials, the Lizard Trial instructs Ethan to cut off one of his fingers. This trial is linked to the lizard origami figure in the sense that lizards continue to live even after losing body parts. However, unlike a lizard, Ethan cannot regenerate lost body parts, so his sacrifice will be both painful and permanent, should he choose to make it.

### 4. The Shark – Survival

*“ARE YOU PREPARED TO KILL SOMEONE TO SAVE YOUR SON?”*

In the Shark Trial, Ethan must murder another person or risk losing Shaun. This trial corresponds to the shark figure because sharks are generally perceived as violent predators with few natural enemies; as members of the animal kingdom, they must kill or be killed. Committing this murder will help Ethan move closer to saving Shaun, and it shows that humans are, at the end of the day, still just animals fighting for survival.

### 5. The Rat – Self-Sacrifice

*“ARE YOU PREPARED TO GIVE YOUR LIFE TO SAVE YOUR SON’S?”*

The Rat Trial is the Origami Killer’s fifth and final trial, and it asks Ethan to make the ultimate sacrifice: his own life. Ethan must drink poison in order to learn Shaun’s location, but the Origami Killer tells Ethan that he will only have enough time to rescue

Shaun before the poison kills Ethan. While the poison is eventually proven to be inert, its ineffectiveness is linked to the rat figure in that rats carry diseases but usually do not die from them. If Ethan successfully completes just one or two of the previous trials, he will only be able to save Shaun with Madison's help.

## 2. **Other**

### 1. **The Dog – Johnny**

The dog was the favorite origami figure of Johnny Sheppard, the Origami Killer's deceased twin brother, and it appears periodically throughout the game as a tender clue about the impact that Johnny's death had on his brother. Ethan even awakens from one of his blackouts with a dog figure in hand, suggesting that the Origami Killer is watching Ethan and trying to communicate his pain to a father he deems deserving while still hiding his true identity.

## 3. **The Sheppard Family**

### 1. **Johnny Sheppard**

*"Don't forget about me, Scottie."*

Johnny Sheppard was the twin brother of Scottie Sheppard (Scott Shelby), and his death was the genesis of the Origami Killer. He died at the age of 10 after his alcoholic and abusive father refused to save Johnny from drowning. In a flashback, Johnny holds Scottie's hand as he dies, and it is when Johnny whispers his dying words (quoted above) that the player learns that Scott Shelby is the Origami Killer. The circumstances of Johnny's death provide the framework for the Origami Killer's murders.

### 2. **Ann Sheppard**

*"[Scottie] must have thought I didn't love him anymore... But I loved him. If you only knew how much I missed him..."*

Ann is the elderly mother of Johnny and Scottie Sheppard (Scott Shelby) who lives in an assisted living community and suffers from Alzheimer's disease. She was unable to save Johnny because she was at work at the time of his drowning, serving as the overworked and absent breadwinner of the Sheppard family. Madison visits Ann and may learn clues about the Origami Killer's identity during Ann's moments of lucidity. Unfortunately, Ann's transition to assisted living made it impossible for her to continue to visit Scottie; her abrupt absence is the primary catalyst for the Origami Killer's murderous spree.

### 3. **Mr. Sheppard**

*"Well, that will be one less greedy mouth to feed."*

Mr. Sheppard is the alcoholic and abusive father of Johnny and Scottie Sheppard. Johnny died because Mr. Sheppard refused to listen to Scottie's pleas to save Johnny from drowning. The trauma associated with this horrific incident contributes to Scottie's emergence as the Origami Killer, who replays Johnny's death through surrogate victims in order to find a father who, unlike Mr. Sheppard, is willing to save their son.

- **Red Herrings**

Although *Heavy Rain* contains many fascinating minor characters, the following is a series of notable secondary characters that provide false leads in the Origami Killer case.

1. **Gordi Kramer**

*“Do you know who my father is? He only has to lift one finger and you won't wake up tomorrow morning. You're the one who should be afraid, Mr. Shelby. Not me.”*

Gordi is the playboy son of a millionaire, and he serves as a false lead in the Origami Killer case due to a botched copycat attempt as well as his open insistence that he is the murderer. Regardless, he believes that his father's money protects him from punishment. As an adult with a penchant for children's cartoons and an inability to realize the risks associated with impersonating a serial killer, Gordi may suffer from a cognitive disability.

2. **Adrian Baker**

*“We're going to have some fun together, my darling...I promise.”*

Also known as “Doctor Death,” Adrian is a drug dealer and a sadistic former surgeon. While he can potentially torture and kill Madison, he serves as a false lead in the Origami Killer case. Although Adrian owns the apartment in which Ethan's third trial takes place, he actually rented it out to Paco, who then rented it out to the real Origami Killer.

3. **Paco Mendez**

*“I think it is you who have misunderstood, honey. I'm tired of wasting my time. It's now or never, and I never take never for an answer.”*

Paco is the shady owner of the Blue Lagoon nightclub and a false lead in the Origami Killer case. While he objectifies women and is primarily concerned with doing whatever will benefit him most, Paco is not responsible for the murders. However, because he rented an apartment to the Origami Killer and therefore knows his true identity, Paco must eventually be silenced.

4. **Nathaniel Williams**

*“As God is my witness, I haven't done anything.”*

Nathaniel is a religious fanatic who fits Norman's profile of the Origami Killer. While his apartment is covered in religious paraphernalia and he hears voices in his head, Nathaniel simply has what Norman terms a “persecution complex” and is not responsible for the murders. His insistence that the hot-headed Carter is the Antichrist suggests that Nathaniel has the unique ability to intuit the true nature of others, but he is not taken seriously because of his mental illness.

## Breakdown

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Entrenched in dark city streets and even darker subject matter, *Heavy Rain* artfully recreates the atmosphere and complexity of film noir while simultaneously providing realistic characters and significant player agency. At the time of *Heavy Rain*'s creation, few other games delivered compelling narratives that were as ruthlessly dependent on the successful implementation of QTEs as those of *Heavy Rain*. While it has over 15 possible epilogues, the game is divided into 53 discrete chapters, five of which correspond to one of the Origami Killer's trials; this form of organization not only helps orient the player by giving them a predictable story structure, but it also links the unique experience of an interactive visual narrative to the familiar experience of reading a book. Because the player experiences the game through the eyes of four different characters, *Heavy Rain*'s narrative also organically gives the player information on different aspects of the Origami Killer case and allows the player to view the situation from diverse emotional perspectives. Ultimately, the narrative of *Heavy Rain* borrows elements from books and films to create an accessible interactive experience, utilizes strategically-implemented QTEs to give the player realistic agency and consequences, and enables the player to learn about mental illness, phobias, and substance abuse through the perspectives of complex, archetypal playable characters.

One exceptional aspect of *Heavy Rain* is its ability to communicate a fount of information about the game's characters and narrative through its vivid visuals, symbols, and overall structure alone. The game transitions between the perspectives of the four playable characters by showing a dynamic close-up of a character's active face on the loading screen that directly precedes that character's next chapter. Without any dialogue or text, this immediately transports the player into the mind of that character and viscerally prepares them for the next scene. The player also slowly unravels the Origami Killer's thought process by interpreting the origami figures, messages, and recordings that accompany each of the five trials. Although the player later learns that the Origami Killer uses origami figures because his deceased brother made them, the player can deduce several things from this aspect of the killer's modus operandi. The Origami Killer painstakingly makes every single origami figure by himself, which turns the process into almost a meditative and ritualistic exercise. He also could easily leave fingerprints on these hand-made items, so the fact that he does not leave any trace of his identity on the origami figures also hints that the Origami Killer has forensic experience. Additionally, each origami figure's animal relates to the trial with which it is paired. The first trial puts Ethan in mortal danger by forcing him to drive against traffic, and so, for the first trial, the Origami Killer crafts a ferocious bear, an animal known for fiercely protecting its young, regardless of personal peril. To illustrate the fragility of the human body and spirit, the second trial's origami figure is a delicate butterfly, suggesting that Ethan needs to move carefully and gracefully in order to survive electrocution and cuts from broken glass. In the third trial, the Origami Killer demands that Ethan cut off one of his own fingers, and so a lizard, a creature that can survive after losing body parts, is a fitting origami figure. A grim shark figure illustrates the fourth trial, which instructs Ethan to murder someone; the central message is that the world is violent and that survival in it requires a kill-or-be-killed mentality. The fifth and final trial tests Ethan's maximum capacity for self-sacrifice, requiring that he consume poison that he believes is deadly in order to save his son; this deceptive trial is represented by a rat figure, animals that are known for spreading diseases without dying from them. In the end, the Origami Killer purposefully selected each animal because he wanted to give his victims' fathers hints about their trials. As evil as his actions are, the Origami Killer betrays his intentions by leaving the origami figures at all; by purposefully distributing clues, he shows that he actually wants his victims' fathers to succeed and end his search for a deserving father.

Based on the player's ability to successfully perform QTEs, make effective conversation choices, and decipher useful clues, *Heavy Rain* offers brutally realistic consequences. The game's branching system of partially-obfuscated cause and effect gives the player practice with experiencing some of the harsh realities of real life. For instance, whenever Norman begins experiencing the negative effects of drug withdrawal, the easiest option is to give him some Triptocaine; however, doing so enables his addiction to the drug, and, if the player chooses to give Norman Triptocaine too many times, Norman will eventually die of an overdose. The player almost always has the ability to avoid taking the drug, but doing so typically takes more time and requires painstakingly-accurate completion of QTEs. Unfortunately, if a player is not particularly skilled at completing QTEs, their poor performance will generate negative consequences that cannot be undone. The game does not allow the player to reload, therefore the player must be particular about the choices they make

and remain immersed so that they can successfully complete QTEs as often as possible. Because all decisions are final and cannot be altered, the game teaches players to think through the potential impact of their choices, providing useful and safe practice for real life. For example, if the player carelessly lets Norman die before Ethan goes to jail during the Lizard Trial, Norman will not be able to break Ethan out of jail, which will then prevent Ethan from completing either of the last two trials; if Ethan cannot complete the last two trials, Shaun will die.

By experiencing *Heavy Rain* through the eyes of four different, archetypal playable characters, the player gains access to unique knowledge and skills that can potentially combine to enable the Origami Killer's capture and Shaun's rescue. By interacting directly with crime scenes, suspects, and private contacts as four different people, the player also assumes the role of an omnipresent puppet master who knows and can take into account all of the available information. Due to the time limits that the Origami Killer places on saving Shaun's life, no one playable character can rescue Shaun on their own; instead, they must distribute the required tasks amongst themselves and tap into their respective resources to find Shaun. To that end, each playable character embodies a different useful archetype. Ethan is the Hapless Father, determined to save Shaun despite his physical and emotional distress, while Norman is the methodical, quick-witted Holmesian Detective with access to advanced technology and law enforcement resources. Madison is the more one-dimensional Tomboy Sidekick, who voluntarily sets aside her own goals in order to help Ethan find Shaun at any cost. Finally, Scott is the Broken Janus, a man split into two selves, one of whom is the Origami Killer looking to the future for a deserving father, while the other self is the traumatized 10-year-old Scottie looking to the past at his own abusive father's destruction. Although he hides the fact that he is the Origami Killer, Scott betrays his private actions and thoughts to the omnipresent player, giving them the full picture that they need in order to effectively guide the other three playable characters to find Shaun.

In addition to providing multiple types of useful information and perspectives, the four playable characters also contend with mental illness, phobias, and substance abuse, which preclude any one character from finding the Origami Killer on their own and normalizes the prevalence of these issues. Ever since he survived the car accident that killed Jason, Ethan has suffered from blackouts, PTSD, and severe agoraphobia, preventing him from investigating Shaun's disappearance in crowded places except when absolutely required. Although they are both more introverted than Ethan, both Madison and Norman organically take over most of the detective work that involves interacting with people, which in turn allows Ethan to focus on completing the Origami Killer's largely-solitary trials. However, Madison and Norman have their own limitations; Madison suffers from insomnia, and Norman has developed an addiction to Triptocaine, a substance he needs to ingest in order to use ARI and do his job. Should Norman fall prey to his addiction or should Madison move a step too slowly against the murderous "Doctor Death," they will die and no longer be able to help Ethan; it is up to the player to decide whether or not Norman and Madison will triumph over their demons. On the other hand, Scott unfortunately cannot be saved. He suffers from extreme PTSD related to watching his twin brother die, and he has already succumbed to his demons by murdering children. Scott aside, the narrative of *Heavy Rain* notably gives the other three playable characters dialogue and QTE options that can bring them closer to overcoming their challenges, perhaps inspiring such action in players in real life. At times, people who contend with mental illness, phobias, and substance abuse can feel as if they will never be free of their issues; the game's ever-present rain calls to mind this pervasive, disheartening feeling. However, should the player find ways to help Madison, Ethan, and Norman manage their psychological issues, they will save Shaun and be rewarded with a hopeful epilogue that is filled with blue skies and light, utterly devoid of the oppressive rain.

## **Strongest Element**

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The crowning achievement of *Heavy Rain*'s narrative is its steady build-up to and reveal of the Origami Killer's true identity: Scott Shelby. While Scott repeatedly states that he was hired by some of the victims' families to find the Origami Killer, he suspiciously never specifies which families he's helping. By showing Scott's vulnerability as a retired police lieutenant with asthma and compassion for his victims' mothers, few players would suspect that he is actually collecting the Origami Killer's clues in order to dispose of them. The narrative even dangles a number of red herrings in front of the

player to distract them from Scott, including disturbing religious fanatic Nathaniel, sadistic drug dealer Adrian, and rich playboy Gordi, who proudly and publicly proclaims that he is the Origami Killer.

True to its film noir roots, *Heavy Rain* culminates in a disturbing and dramatic revelation that calls to mind the twist ending of the neo-noir classic *Chinatown*; in a flashback to the Origami Killer's childhood, the player watches Johnny drown because his father won't save him, and Johnny uses his last breath to reveal the identity of the Origami Killer, saying, "Don't forget about me, Scottie." Since Scott Shelby is one of the four playable characters, the player must suddenly come to terms with the fact that they have unknowingly been experiencing the game as the serial killer himself the entire time. It was only after witnessing his father's abhorrent actions that Scott became the Origami Killer, which could make the player feel a reluctant pang of guilt for the homicidal character; this fact also taps into the pervasive human fear that anyone can become a murderer if pushed too far by deplorable people or circumstances. As Nietzsche famously said, "He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster. And when you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you."<sup>2</sup>

Finally, the most subtle yet masterful clue to the Origami Killer's identity comes in the form of the initials of Shaun and Jason matching up with the initials of Scottie and Johnny. Jason and Johnny both died due in part to their fathers' inability to protect them, and Scott sees his lost innocence in Shaun (and perhaps in all of his victims). In the end, Scott needs Ethan to save Shaun so that Scott, by proxy, can be saved.

## Unsuccessful Element

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One of the most unsuccessful elements of *Heavy Rain*'s narrative is Madison Paige's overall characterization. Although the writers were likely aiming to craft a mysterious and strong female character, they ended up producing a woefully underdeveloped and oversexualized caricature of female empowerment. Madison's backstory and motivations are largely unknown, which detracts from her depth and individuality rather than enhancing an alluring mystique; instead of acting based on her desires, Madison reacts and attends to Ethan's needs without question, all but relinquishing her agency. While applying make-up and tearing her skirt are logical actions based on her observations of a suspect's taste for stripteases, those actions are also uniquely gendered and put Madison in a dangerous and degrading position. The fact that she feels compelled to put herself on display in order to learn more information suggests to the player that Madison primarily relies on her sexual allure to solve problems rather than on her mind. In fact, in Madison's first appearance in the game, she is clad in only panties and a thin camisole, immediately and unnecessarily sexualizing the character before she even speaks.

Perhaps most disappointing of all is Madison's bland, lifeless dialogue. Unlike the other playable characters, Madison lacks a distinct voice, perhaps due in part to the purposeful omission of information about her origins. Throughout the game, Madison exclaims tired, generic lines, such as, "That's what I call kicking butt! You go, girl!" and "Time to play the sexy girl!" Madison's overall characterization feels one-dimensional and demeaning, and it fails to communicate the complexity, individuality, and depth of a real person, giving players unrealistic and unhealthy expectations of women.

## Highlight

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One of the best moments in the game's narrative occurs in a flashback shortly before Jason's accidental death, during which Ethan plays games with his two sons in their open and inviting backyard. The weather during this segment is sunny, reflecting Ethan's upbeat emotional state at the time, and his family's dialogue and actions show that they are happy, loving, and reasonably functional. As Ethan, the player can give his sons piggyback and helicopter rides, lift his boys to playfully show off his strength, and engage in a friendly fight with fake swords. These are all ordinary activities in which any father might engage with his children, but that's the point – playing these simple yet intimate games with Ethan's sons deepens the player's emotional attachment to them, taking the player to another level of both physical and

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<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1989. Aphorism 146.

emotional connection that makes Jason's death and Shaun's kidnapping feel genuinely devastating. This deep, unique attachment is one that movies and books, lacking this interactive element, cannot replicate.

## Critical Reception

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In his review of *Heavy Rain* for IGN, Chris Roper<sup>3</sup> warned the reader about the game's slow opening, but he emphasized the relevance of the events that transpire in the prologue. Without establishing the functional, happy relationship between Ethan and his two sons, neither Jason's death nor Shaun's kidnapping would be nearly as impactful for the player. He also highlighted a narrative trait about *Heavy Rain* that was especially unique at the time of its creation: there is no "Game Over" screen. While the player can technically never fail a fight or task, the player also cannot reload or replay a segment. Even if a player misses all of the QTEs during an encounter, they must continue the game with the related consequences. Due to the game's branching narrative, the outcome of nearly every segment affects the remainder of the game; Roper noted that this feature gives the player agency and makes them feel as if they are "choosing and influencing what happens in the game, rather than simply reacting to it" (Roper 2010, p.1). One of *Heavy Rain*'s crowning achievements lies in the fact that "everything in the game revolves around the story" and every choice the player makes directs the story, which is comparable to real life (Roper 2010, p.1). *Heavy Rain* received primarily positive reviews for its groundbreaking storytelling, earning a Metascore of 87 out of 100 from Metacritic,<sup>4</sup> a 9.5 out of 10 from Game Informer,<sup>5</sup> and multiple professional honors, including the 2011 BAFTA award for Best Story.<sup>6</sup> Despite the game's critical acclaim, Microsoft elected not to release *Heavy Rain* for Xbox 360 due to its disturbing "themes of kidnapping children."<sup>7</sup>

## Lessons

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- **When developing new narrative experiences in games, exploit similarities between games and other types of media to make the narrative more accessible.** Because *Heavy Rain* functions as an interactive visual novel, splitting the game into chapters helps the player track their progression in a familiar fashion. The game's gloomy atmosphere, twisting plot points, and cast of traumatized characters also call to mind the well-established genre of film noir, which can help orient less experienced players.
- **Give the player enough agency to direct the narrative but prevent them from altering the past so that they learn to accept the consequences of their actions.** The player's selection of their actions and dialogue enables them to take control of the narrative, but they must choose wisely because they cannot reload if they make a mistake. Nearly every decision is permanent and affects future events, making the consequences of these decisions feel especially impactful because the player brought them upon themselves.
- **Selectively weave ordinary experiences into the narrative in order to create extraordinary emotional connections between the player and the game's characters.** Performing an ordinary activity in a game has the potential to deepen the player's investment in the narrative and enhance immersion as long as that activity serves a specific purpose. An interactive piggyback ride with Shaun forges a unique emotional connection between Shaun and the player, making his eventual kidnapping feel all the more heartbreaking. This kind of targeted

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<sup>3</sup> Roper, Chris. *Heavy Rain Review*. <http://www.ign.com/articles/2010/02/10/heavy-rain-review>. IGN. 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Heavy Rain. <http://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-3/heavy-rain>. Metacritic. 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Juba, Joe. *Heavy Rain*. [http://www.gameinformer.com/games/heavy\\_rain/b/ps3/archive/2010/02/10/review.aspx](http://www.gameinformer.com/games/heavy_rain/b/ps3/archive/2010/02/10/review.aspx). Game Informer. 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Heavy Rain Awards. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1606610/awards>. IMDb.

<sup>7</sup> Gera, Emily. *Heavy Rain originally turned down by Microsoft due to child kidnapping themes*. <http://www.polygon.com/2013/9/3/4691594/heavy-rain-originally-turned-down-by-microsoft-due-to-child>. Polygon. 2013.

mundane interaction can build an authentic emotional bridge between reality and the digital world in which the game is set.

- **Explore new types of archetypal characters who have realistic, relatable flaws – and give them the capacity to conquer them.** Three of the four playable characters have the capacity to overcome their psychological issues if the player is determined to figure out how to do so. Many people are affected by mental illness, phobias, or substance abuse in some way, and developers can use game narratives to normalize these issues, empower people who struggle with them, and remove the stigma that often prevents our society from addressing them.

## Summation

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Thanks to its complex and flawed main characters, its familiar chapter divisions and use of storytelling devices from other media, and its compelling player-driven narrative, *Heavy Rain* is an emotionally-intense interactive psychological thriller that results in a truly unique video game experience. The game utilizes interactive QTEs for nearly all aspects of the narrative, from choosing dialogue to dodging oncoming traffic to playing with children, generating dramatic tension and stress as well as authentic emotional connections with pivotal characters. Finally, the four playable characters all embody flawed, relatable archetypes whose strengths illustrate that psychological issues do not define a person or necessarily doom them to failure; the more that game writers create characters who can conquer these types of challenges, the more the game industry can contribute to the de-stigmatization of mental illness, phobias, and substance abuse and help ensure that those who are affected can get the help they need.

Although its winding plot twists, shady cast of characters, and branching narrative help to establish *Heavy Rain* as a compelling interactive psychological thriller, one small but significant detail solidifies the haunting nature of the game: there is no mention in *Heavy Rain* of the city in which it is set. While this may make the game more accessible for players who are not familiar with major cities, this omission also suggests that the terrifying events that unfold in *Heavy Rain* – from Johnny’s accidental drowning to the Origami Killer’s heinous murders – could happen anywhere and to anyone. At this very moment, a serial killer could be living next door, or the player themselves could be just one traumatic event away from becoming the next Origami Killer.