

Game Title: Silent Hill 2: Restless Dreams

Platform: PlayStation 2

Genre: Survival Horror

Release Date: Sept. 24, 2001

Developer: Konami/Team Silent

Publisher: Konami

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Hiroyuki Owaku/Masashi Tsuboyama

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Overview

James Sunderland stares at his reflection in the mirror of a filthy public restroom. “Mary, could you really be here?” he mutters to himself. James recalls a letter he received from his dead wife Mary and sets off for the town from which it came, the town of Silent Hill. Silent Hill 2: Restless Dreams is a survival horror game that pulls back the skin of James Sunderland’s psyche exposing a metaphysical fog of horrors and a disturbing interpretation of a purgatory scenario.

Silent Hill 2 is very much a narrative-driven game. As the player progresses the town reveals itself as a nightmarish projection of James’ inner torment and the unresolved

guilt he feels for having murdered his wife. Silent Hill is sparsely populated by some memorable characters. Some of these people appear to be real beings but most are manifestations of James' emotional state used to further the narrative by stringing the player along their search for answers. The game plays much like any other survival title. As the player progresses, he or she must solve puzzles and keep an eye out for anything useful they may come across like health, ammo, and a variety of keys. James will also encounter some of the less desirable denizens of Silent Hill in the form of hellish creatures that are akin to something out of a Hieronymus Bosch or Francis Bacon painting. The aesthetic designs of these monsters are based on the psychological issues James is struggling with such as sexual frustration, guilt, and dominance. Once the player has navigated this Freudian landscape of psychological horrors and symbolism the player is rewarded with one of seven endings representing the choices he or she has made.

Characters

James Sunderland- This is the character that the player has control over. The story of Silent Hill 2 centers around James' return to the town of Silent Hill to search for his dead wife Mary. Later the player realizes James murdered Mary and that his journey and what he encounters actually reflects James' repressed psychological state.

Mary Sunderland- The object of James Sunderland's search. Three years prior to the timeframe of the game Mary was stricken ill with cancer. Either unable to deal with this burden or out of some twisted form of compassion, James suffocated Mary on their

vacation to Silent Hill. Past memories of Mary haunt James and manifest themselves in the character of Maria.

Maria- An apparition created in James' mind to ease his guilt. Representing James' idealized view of Mary, Maria is an over-sexualized version of his late wife. In the course of the story Maria dies on different occasions forcing James to repent for what he has done over and over.

Laura- Another figment of Sunderland's mind, Laura is a child that roams the streets of Silent Hill taunting James. Laura represents the child James never had as well as the child-like emotional aspects he imputed to his wife.

Eddie- One of the few physical beings also in Silent Hill. Eddie, by appearances, is on a journey of his own to escape from his past crimes and is tormented by feelings of self-loathing and guilt. He is a representation of guilt, sloth, and later in the game, wrath.

Angela- Angela is an emotionally scarred childlike woman. Suffering from a childhood of abuse at the hands of her father, she roams Silent Hill in her own version of a private hell.

Pyramid Head- A pale blood-splattered hulking figure, Pyramid Head is portrayed as overtly masculine and carries a large rusty sword. PH relentlessly pursues James partly as a personification of guilt, and in a sense is the main villain of the game. Theories as to what PH is actually meant to represent within the context of James' psyche are wide and varied.

Breakdown

The strong psychological themes in Silent Hill 2 offer to the player an unprecedented take on some uncomfortable subjects. One of the main themes deals with the burden of love and coping with guilt. The reason I mention these two together is because within James Sunderland's mind these emotions are intertwined and projected outwards upon the canvas of Silent Hill. Whether or not James murdered his wife out of compassion, wanting her to suffer no longer, or because of the emotional damage he feels she caused him, the fact is James did love Mary very much; which is made apparent by his fond remembrance of her before she became ill. The enormous guilt he feels is made clear as the plot progresses and the player realizes the significance of the audio, visual, and narrative symbolism that's used. The town of Silent Hill acts as a conduit to the repressed negative aspects of emotion its inhabitants are experiencing, manifesting their guilt as horrific projections of their greatest fears and aberrant psyche. Some see Silent Hill as a punishment, or hell for the unlucky few the town calls to. I view Silent Hill as a form of purgatory meant for the guilty to confront their demons in a most unsettling way.

One particular scene offers a veritable smorgasbord of psychological symbolism. James enters a room affectionately referred to by fans as 'the womb', where he finds Angela confronted by a disturbing abomination. As Angela cries in the corner, James faces a creature resembling a man hunched over a small bed frame, as underneath it, the sheets of flesh seem to struggle in protest. As the player fights to down this beast, skin covered pistons methodically pump in and out of large holes in the pink walls of the room. The creature, as well as the room itself, is a projection of the personalized torture

the town has created for the character of Angela. A woman with the mind of a child, Angela's damaged psyche stems from the sexual abuse at the hands of her father, and the requited guilt she suffers for having murdered him.

The characters and environment are not the only things in Silent Hill painted in a thick coat of symbolic meaning. All of the enemies James encounters carry deep insight into his psyche. Much like the aforementioned bedframe monster, each creature carries its own meaning relative to the narrative. The Lying Figure monster is depicted as a female figure struggling to break free from the straight jacket of skin covering its body. This is meant to be a depiction of the pain and suffering Mary went through when she had cancer as well as James' true self attempting to surface through his repression. Each creature holds much significance in relation to the way James deals with his feelings of guilt, and in this sense, understanding the nature of each creature gives the player greater understanding of Sunderland's subconscious.

While it's true each monster holds potent symbolic meaning, none leave as indelible an impression on the player as the nightmare fuel incarnate- Pyramid Head. There are multiple theories among fans as to what the manifestation of Pyramid Head represents relative to Sunderland's psyche. The most common view is that of a punisher and the embodiment of oppressive masculinity. This theory contests that PH exists to torment James for murdering his wife and is a reflection of his guilt relentlessly pursuing him. PH is a clear representation of James' Shadow archetype and repressed sexual urges as a phallic symbol with his triangular metal helmet and large sword. PH and Maria both

stem from James' unconscious and are tightly intertwined to his emotional state. Maria, being a manifestation of James' ideal view of his wife before her illness, is executed three times in front of James, tearing off the band aid of repression to reveal his wounded psyche. My view as to what PH represents deviates from the previous one. I look at PH as a ghoulish guide through a waking nightmare. The actual role of this monster is to help James understand his guilt and realize the fact that he is trapped within an illusion created by his mind. By killing Maria, PH is attempting to kill James' delusional representation of Mary to ensure he faces and understands the truth he is attempting to repress. Seen this way, it's possible to picture Maria as the real enemy in Silent Hill, representing the weakness inside James to succumb to illusion and direct him away from his goal of coming to terms with his true self. There are times when PH's methods seem harsh, but the battles waged within ones subconscious are hard-fought, and in some cases extreme measures must be taken to overcome a comfortable lie.

Another important narrative element to the structure of Silent Hill 2 is the symbolic significance of the various endings the player is rewarded with at the conclusion of the game. There are seven endings the player can achieve but only three of these are appropriately contextual to the nature of James Sunderland's relationship to Silent Hill as a personification of his emotion. The first is referred to as the "Leave Ending," in which James imagines himself at the bedside of his dying wife. As he places his hand on hers, she consoles his feelings of guilt urging him to leave Silent Hill forever and move on with his life. I consider this to be the healthiest conclusion for James, allowing him to shed the illusions he has created and in a way deal with guilt-stricken emotional scars. The second

ending of relevance is known as “In the Water.” In this scenario James concludes that his reason for being brought to Silent Hill is to again be reunited with Mary. He realizes the only way to accomplish this is to commit suicide and drives his car into a lake. This ending results from James giving in to his guilt, as the manifestations of his mind push him off the edge of madness. From a romanticized perspective the act of suicide in James’ mind allows him to once again be with Mary in death. The third conclusion called “The Maria Ending” is my favorite and gives the greatest insight to the underlying themes of Silent Hill 2 while still leaving the player with a sense of obfuscation. In this scenario, James confronts his wife Mary who morphs into a horrific vision. After ‘murdering’ her for a second time James promptly encounters Maria who persuades him to leave Silent Hill with her. This is unsettling in that Maria is a projection of Sunderland’s mind and reveals that James has lost the battle to find the truth within, instead yielding to a distorted reality of delusion. As James and Maria turn to leave, she lets out a few sickly coughs foreshadowing that James is doomed to repeat his past. These three endings offer three very different resolutions to the player and are achieved independently regarding the play-style and decisions you make in the game, and in the process, reveal a part of yourself. For example, if the player checks on Maria consistently throughout the game and goes out of the way to protect her, these acts add weight to the illusion of Maria being real in Sunderland’s mind and reward the player with the Maria Ending.

Strongest Element

The strongest element in Silent Hill 2 is the representation of psychological themes through symbolism. Many of the monsters and puzzles are actually manifestations of James Sunderland's mind and give the player greater understanding of the turmoil within his unconscious and insight into his psychological condition. The Jungian idea of the Shadow archetype representing projected reflections of the unconscious is heavily used through the thick veil of fog and creeping darkness in the environment as well as in the creatures James encounters. In this example, the shadow is balanced by the Anima which is represented by the characters of Mary and Maria. Even Mary's name represents the third level of Anima development in which femininity begets virtue through the male's perception.

Unsuccessful Element

Although the game doesn't focus around combat, the player must still dispatch a few monsters along the way. Combat feels awkward and slow and becomes downright frustrating in close quarters or when facing multiple enemies. I often found myself simply running past most enemies rather than suffering through the unpleasant action. Where most combat is avoidable there are some encounters you cannot escape and these scenes have a tendency to remove the player from the game a bit with their unnatural controls and pacing. Silent Hill does a poor job of handling action-oriented gameplay, but then again, if someone is playing this game for the action then they are clearly missing the message Silent Hill is attempting to convey.

Highlight

There are many moments in Silent Hill 2 that share the narrative spotlight, however, there is one scene that impacts not only the story of the game but also the perception of James through the player's eyes. In this scene James sits alone in the same room he and his wife Mary stayed in three years before. He pushes a dusty videocassette into a VCR and proceeds to watch. The video shows James kneeling beside his sick wife consoling her and assuring her she will get better. The video feed cuts for a moment then comes back on screen as James watches himself suffocating Mary with a pillow. She screams and attempts to fight back but inevitably succumbs to death. This is the point at which the player realizes Mary's fate and is able to place into context the mental anguish of James as well as many of the psychological overtones contained within the game. I can still recall my shock from the first time I played Silent Hill 2 and how this moment completely changed my previously conceived insight into James' psyche and the meaning behind much of the symbolism in the game.

Critical Reception

Silent Hill 2 has received many positive reviews citing its eerie climate and surreal story. IGN reviewer Doug Perry gave the game a 9/10 writing that Silent Hill 2 has "an incredible atmosphere, and a slow, creepy haunt of a story that grows on you like an evil mold." Perry continues stating, "Konami's effort is a damn scary game. It's frightening, deep, clever, and tries to improve the genre." Matt Wadleigh at Thunderbolt Games called the story "incredibly psychological and deep, playing on the basics of what makes a

human a human.” Matt goes on to describe the characters as “true to life, realistic beings that portray emotions and express them,” and gave the game an overall score of 9/10.

Lessons

Silent Hill 2 contains a number of important elements that have positively impacted narrative-driven games and the survival horror genre.

1. Symbolism, when used appropriately, can be an extremely potent tool in communicating the deeper meaning of things that might otherwise go unnoticed. It is a subtle and artful way to convey a message much as the butterflies in Silent Hill represent rebirth and femininity. Or the idea of Pyramid Head as a phallic symbol with his metal helmet and sword. When symbolic images are interpreted, it affects the player on both a conscious and subconscious level.
2. The consistent use of authentic psychological principles can play an important role in understanding the mind of a character. The idea of using psychology to convey the emotions of James Sunderland as a fictional character lends credence to his guilt and suffering and allows for a greater emotional investment from the player. The projections of James' mind throughout Silent Hill, such as the monsters encountered and the atmospheric feel of the environment, hold deeper meaning for those who wish to have greater insight to James' aberrant psyche.
3. There are vast differences between creating a hole in the plot of a story and leaving a narrative point open to interpretation. Silent Hill 2's story is complete, but interestingly, the conclusions the player can draw as the plot is unraveled usually

wind up being uniquely individual. The narrative is structured in such a way that it allows the player to fill in the blanks of what is left unsaid with their personal take on its meaning, and in a sense, psychologically profiling the player in the process. The fact that I view Pyramid Head as a guide and savior reveals something personal about me.

4. Finding a working balance between narrative and gameplay is an important goal to achieve for any developer. It detracts from the enjoyment of a game if the presentation is all action but with a weak story, or narrative heavy with unpleasant gameplay. In a story driven game like Silent Hill 2 the frustration of play mechanics like enemy combat can draw the user out of the world the developers are attempting to keep you in.

Summation

Silent Hill 2 is well deserving of analysis with its fantastic and unique take on the survival horror genre. The unforgettable characters and vivid plot give an unprecedented backstage pass to a surreal landscape of horrors. The jarring soundtrack, creepy atmosphere, and hauntingly horrific creatures still give me shudders if I reminisce upon them for too long. The implementation of real world psychology and powerful symbolism pull the player deep inside the disturbed mind of James Sunderland, and for a few tense hours, you live his waking nightmare as you follow him down a spiral of truth-seeking madness.

