

Detailed analysis of silent hill two media essay



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Silent Hill 2 is a 2001 survival horror/puzzle game released for the playstation 2 by Konami. It is the sequel to the first Silent Hill game released in 1999 for the original playstation. Silent Hill 2 is seen by many as landmark game, which capitalised on elements of game design previously ignored or seen as of secondary importance. It is difficult to categorise the appeal of Silent Hill 2, as at first glance its gameplay could appear primitive or certainly repetitive, while its subject matter and storyline are nothing new to the horror genre. To put it in more prosaic terms Silent Hill 2 is very much ‘more than the sum of its parts’, and this makes it a particularly interesting candidate for in depth analysis. For the greatest part of this essay I will refer to the game via the shorthand reference: SH2.

Gameplay in SH2 revolves around a mixture of puzzle solving and simple combat. As the main protagonist progresses through the town of Silent Hill, he must fight various monsters using a variety of weapons. These range from a simple plank to a hunting rifle. In keeping with the survival horror nature of the game, ammunition is quite scarce as are the supplies necessary for healing, and individual enemies can take significant time and effort to kill. The player will find him/herself conserving ammunition for the stronger enemies and bosses, and thus any encounter with a monster brings with it a sense of trepidation and anxiety. Even the least powerful of the monsters becomes formidable if the player’s health and ammo is low, and he/she is forced to use the wooden plank. This is compounded by the fact that the enemies in SH2 are extremely resistant to damage and take a considerable time to kill outright (though they may be knocked to the ground for a temporary immobilisation). All of these elements combine to nurture a

sense of extreme reluctance to progress through the town's environs, and help create a fear of the unknown path ahead. Unfortunately the game fails to find the right balance between challenge and enjoyability with its combat.

Defeating the monsters in Silent Hill is far more tedious than it is gripping. There is far too little variety in the methods of attack and too much time is required to kill each one that soon combat becomes a slow and repetitive affair of repeatedly swinging the iron bar at low powered enemies in order to conserve ammo. Furthermore once an enemy locks into combat with the player, it no longer becomes necessary to reposition the main character, resulting in gameplay requiring no more input than holding down the attack button.

There is no heads up display in SH2, and the player must access the start menu to see how much ammo or health remains. When the player has taken excessive damage the playstation controller will subtly vibrate alerting him/her to the condition they are in. This merely adds to the frustrating nature of the combat in SH2, as no clear indication of how much damage can be taken against an enemy is ever given. This results in the player frequently dying while fighting the numerous minor enemies, even with plenty of health packs in reserve. Attacks given and received in combat are accompanied by a vibration of the controller which masks the warning vibrations when close to death and further jeopardises health management. This is a grave shortcoming which detracts from the rather well designed puzzle element of SH2.

Puzzles range from fairly untaxing instances of collecting and combining items to extremely cryptic riddles requiring a good deal of thought to solve. The riddles show imagination in their intricacy and leave the player with a sense of achievement for having solved them. Unfortunately instances of these riddles are far less frequent than the occurrence of monsters in silent hill.

SH2 is the story of James Sunderland, a man looking for his deceased wife after receiving a letter from her which says that she is waiting for him in the town of Silent Hill, a place where they used to holiday when she was alive. James' wife was named Mary, and he begins the game with a photograph of her along with the letter signed by her in his inventory. The game begins with James having driven to Silent Hill only to find the entrance road blocked. He stops at a highway toilet, examines his own reflection in the bathroom mirror, reads the letter from his wife again and decides to enter the town on foot. James commences walking through the woods. The game's atmosphere is established early on by thick fog and strange disconcerting noises as he makes his way.

James eventually comes upon a graveyard and we are introduced to the game's first non-playable character: Angela. As James finds her she is sitting among the tombstones. The conversation between the two seems disjointed. This sets the tone for the dialogue in the game. Much of what Angela says makes little sense, James asks her questions but she seems incapable of giving him a straight answer, as though her thoughts are not fully in the present. We gather enough from what she says to learn that she is looking for her 'mama' in Silent Hill. At a later point in the game we learn that

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Angela had an abusive childhood and that this has left her with a desire to end her own life. Her father was killed (it seems likely by Angela), and the family home burned down. James proceeds to enter the town proper.

Everything is covered in a thick fog. The town looks for the most part normal except that it is utterly deserted and the cars, signage, and architecture have an outdated feel. We soon meet our first enemy- a non descript grotesque humanoid shape which James dispatches with the aid of a wooden plank.

Soon James finds himself in an apartment building. The building is in an appalling state of repair, displaying many signs of decay with walls stained horribly with rust, mildew and blood. Here we meet our second character, Eddie. The room we find Eddie in does not display such advanced decay. Eddie is in the process of vomiting into the toilet when we meet him, and the body of a human can be seen in the kitchen unit. This is not overly remarkable in light of the monsters roaming the apartment, but Eddie is instantly defensive in his conversation with James, and his frequent uncalled for denials that he murdered the man in the kitchen lead us to suspect that he in fact did. It is noteworthy that Eddie never mentions the monsters, which would conveniently explain the body. Eddie appears to be a man of limited intelligence- coarse, with a cruel side to his nature.

When James finds his way out of the apartment he discovers a little girl named Laura wandering the streets by herself. Laura tells James that she shared a ward with Mary in the hospital during Mary's illness. This strikes James as highly suspect, Mary was supposed to have died three years ago, when Laura would have been very young indeed. He tries to question Laura

on the matter but just like the previous conversations with Angela and Eddie, it bears little fruit.

James continues on towards Rosewater Park, one of the places which would fit Mary's description of a 'special place' from her letter. Instead of Mary James meets a woman who calls herself Maria. James is astounded at Maria's appearance, as she looks almost identical to his dead wife Mary. Their personalities are less similar however; Mary is extraverted and bawdy whereas Mary was reserved and ladylike. Maria is dressed in a suggestively low cut outfit with a mini skirt and an incident later on in 'Heaven's Night' strip club infers that she works as a stripper. Maria says she doesn't know Mary and takes James' confusing of the two women badly. It is significant that James should meet Maria in the place he expected Mary, not to mention the similarities in appearance. Maria resolves to join James in his search for Mary. After an episode in the hospital Maria is violently killed on front of James by a sinister pyramid headed monster which is seemingly impervious to attack. Later on he finds her inexplicably alive and well before she is again killed on front of him. This pattern repeats itself three times in the game, as James is forced to witness his dead wife's doppelganger murdered in front of him. James receives no explanation for this, or the manner in which Maria seems to share memories of Mary with James; and though she becomes angry when James confuses the two women, it seems that even she confuses herself with Mary.

James surmises that Mary's special place must be the hotel by the lake and makes his way there. He encounters Laura and Eddie at various times but their conversations reveal little apart from the extent of their mutual

confusion. In a prison on the way to the Hotel James meets Eddie in a room full of recently murdered human corpses. This is strange as Silent Hill appears to have been deserted for some time. Eddie has lost his mind, and starts talking about having to kill people for 'making fun of him'. Eddie becomes convinced James is 'just like all the rest' and tries to kill James but fails, losing his own life in the process.

James finally reaches the Hotel. A look in the games inventory screen reveals that Mary's note has gone blank. This raises the question of whether or not it ever existed. James reaches the room where he and Mary stayed. The room is in perfect condition and is empty apart from a vcr and a television. James inserts a video he found elsewhere in the Hotel and watches in horror at footage of himself putting a pillow over Mary's face in her hospital bed. It finally becomes clear- James killed Mary. He sits with his head bowed for some time until Laura enters. We wonder how she made it into the hotel past all of the monsters and traps. James tells Laura he killed Mary. At this point the player realises the origin of James' confusion. Mary was dying and James killed her and subsequently blocked out the memory. Now the chronology of the game makes more sense; Mary didn't die but merely got sick three years ago and James killed her much more recently. This explains how Laura had met her not long ago. It transpires that Mary's illness badly affected her appearance and demeanour, causing her to lash out at James. This goes some way to explaining why James did what he did. Just before the final boss James again meets Angela. She is consumed by despair and James can do nothing to dissuade her from suicide. James is forced to witness the death of Maria at the hands of pyramid head one last time before proceeding to the

roof of the Hotel where an evil incarnation of either Mary or Maria (depending on the player's actions during the game) awaits. There are four endings to SH2:

1: In the 'Leave' ending, the woman on the roof is Maria yet again, disguised as Mary in an attempt to trick James. James refuses her and Maria transforms into a monster. After James defeats this Boss Maria, he finds himself by Mary's bedside once again. He explains to Mary that he killed her to end her suffering but also selfishly to end his own difficulty in having to care for her. He reads Mary's letter in full and then leaves the town with Laura.

2: The 'in water' ending is the same as above except instead of leaving with Laura we hear the sounds of James' car driving into a lake. We surmise that he could not live without Mary and chose to drown himself. Mary's letter scrolls across a screen with a watery background.

3: In the 'Maria' ending James is reunited with Maria after the fight and the pair leave town together. As he helps her into his car she begins coughing. It seems likely that Maria will fall ill just like Mary did. It could be construed as a punishment for James, or perhaps even a chance of salvation if he sees Maria's illness to the end, the way he never did for Mary.

4: The rebirth ending, which can only be unlocked during a replay sees James killing boss Maria, and then taking Mary's body out to an island in Toluca Lake via boat. It appears as though he intends to resurrect Mary using various talismans he found in game at the church on the island.

SH2, with its multiple endings and abundant ambiguity has no single reading or interpretation. Just as James discovers his own true past after watching the video the player must assemble his/her own definitive narrative based on the events they have witnessed. Many of the events negate each other, or have causes and consequences which are mutually exclusive. These include Mary's note which disappears partway through the game, or Maria's frequent resurrections. It becomes apparent after some reflection that if SH2 provides an account of these inconsistencies it is not made explicit and it's left up to the player to make sense of events. The one theme each one of the endings have in common is that someone along the line in the story, be it Maria or Mary, turns out to be a figment of James' imagination. Given that each ending allows for this possibility it seems likely that much of what James' has experienced in Silent Hill was a product of his own mind. This reasoning is the only way to build a logical picture of the events of SH2. The best way to examine this theory is to look closer at James' encounters with the other characters in the game.

The characters in SH2 converse with each other in a disjointed way, as though each inhabits a separate reality which only they have access to. It appears as though the town presents a subjective reality to each person who visits it. It also makes sense to think that each character's reality can only be observed when they meet face to face. The evidence for this is quite strong when one examines how the characters interact.

Eddie never once mentions the monsters that threaten James, for him Silent Hill is a place full of people who make fun of him. James never sees any of these people except lying dead in and around Eddie. The town is less

dilapidated when we meet Eddie, such as in the apartment room, where sports posters adorn the wall. It is uncertain why Silent Hill drew Eddie to it but his experience there is a failure, he loses his mind and commences slaughtering everyone. His experience of Silent Hill ends when he meets a real person- James, who kills him.

Angela provides an even more dramatic example. When James rescues her she is being threatened by a monster that she refers to as 'daddy'. This scene provides a good insight into how the town manifests itself to different people. The room is full of the decor of a domestic living room, even though it occurs in an underground labyrinth. Angela apparently sees Silent Hill through the eyes of her childhood. She saw her father while all James saw was a monster. The last time James meets Angela it is in the burning hallway. This seems to be a representation of how her childhood home burned down. James remarks that "it's hot as hell in here", while Angela replies "You see it too? For me it's always like this." The fire only exists when Angela is near; when James leaves the room, the Hotel is back to its damp rotting self.

The town seems perfectly normal in the presence of Laura, and this explains how an eight year old girl could run from place to place without being harassed by monsters. In the bowling alley we find Laura and Eddie together eating a pizza. This too is revealing. The silent Hill James experiences is far too old and unsanitary a place to find food in, whereas for Laura and Eddie it appears just ordinary enough to find a pizza.

Now we have some idea of how the town works for different people we can make more sense of James' experiences. Firstly the chances of Maria being a real person seem dubious. Unlike the other characters in the game Maria is the only one who shares James' experiences and can witness the things he can. This is evidence against her existence outside of James' imagination, as none of the other characters seem to have any idea what James means when he talks of monsters. Furthermore none of the other characters ever see Maria, and when she and James arrive at the bowling alley she stays outside, away from Laura and Eddie so as not to reveal her illusory nature by appearing on front of people who cannot see her. There is also the more obvious discrepancy of her many deaths and resurrections; the other characters seem much more conventional in this regard. Finally there are the comparisons between Maria and Mary. She has the same body, and appears in the same spot James expects to see Mary- all suggestive of an imaginary Maria hypotheses; a construct of James' mind composed of elements of his dead wife.

Pyramid head, like all the monsters in SH2, is a further construct of James' imagination. He plays a role in that he forces James to face his own guilt by killing the image of his wife before his eyes again and again. James admits this to himself before the final fight with the twin pyramid heads: " that's why I needed you, needed someone to punish me for my sins". Interestingly James never actually harms pyramid head during combat. All the encounters with him are survived by endurance rather than by beating him. In the end it is pyramid head that kills himself.

So the definitive narrative of SH2 is thus: James, forced to care for what was left of his sick wife, decided to kill her rather than have either of them suffer any longer. Once he had killed her however, he was filled with feelings of guilt and began living in denial, telling himself and others that she had died three years ago. In fact however; he hated himself, and needed to face the truth of what he had done, and so he was drawn to the town of Silent Hill where the forces of the town led him on a journey to face himself.

Aesthetically SH2 has a very unified and clear vision of itself. As an audio visual experience the different elements tie together very well and form quite a cohesive 'feeling' game of seamless stylistic integrity. Particular attention was given to the design of the monsters which reflect the nature of James inner turmoil. Apart from pyramid head every monster in SH2 is feminine in nature. Even the indistinguishable humanoid shapes that spit acid have high pitched female voices and long legs. Some of the monster designs have sexual overtones such as the mannequins or the nurses. It seems plausible to read this as a manifestation of James relationship towards womankind since he murdered his wife. It could even be said that the form of the monsters are derived from the nature of Marys disfiguring illness.

The sense of atmosphere in SH2 is superbly well crafted. To this end the designers have employed prolific use of heavy fog and darkness to create a fear of progressing forward into the unknown. This is coupled with the use of a noise grain filter that lends an organic feel to the textures and ties in with the static motif reflected in the radio. The noise filter plays tricks on the eye, making walls appear to crawl and adding to the sense of chaos and unease. Every area exhibits a very high level of detail, with various bits of rubbish,

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graffiti, and detritus creating a thoroughly believable, lived in, (though abandoned) town.

The minimal soundtrack is no less appropriate, with Akira Yamaoka opting more for industrial or ambient soundscapes than a conventional soundtrack (although a conventional song was also composed for the game). The imagination displayed in the composition of the soundtrack is impressive. Yamaoka employed very few conventional instruments, instead creating deeply unsettling otherworldly cacophonies of banging iron, bee-hives, saws, miscellaneous improvised percussion, sirens, wild animals, and heavy machinery.

It is unfortunate therefore considering the quality of SH2 as an aesthetic experience, to find it marred by the camera. SH2 uses a third person viewpoint at all times with only a miniscule degree of control afforded to the player. The game has a very cinematic attitude to camera placement and as a result the camera is tyrannical in its inflexibility. Examination of the detail in the graphics is forbidden at all times by the camera, which will change position at the drop of a hat to the other side of a room. Though the camera positions are clearly deliberately chosen to lend the game an avant-garde and cinematic veneer they succeed only in hampering movement, increasing combat difficulty and generally detracting from SH2's enjoyment on every level.

In conclusion the strength of Silent Hill 2 lies in its ability to tell a compelling and intriguing story while successfully evoking a palpably uneasy atmosphere. SH2 represents an advance in the video game as form, as it

redefines the areas in which a game succeeds at entertaining. By all traditional standards the gameplay is uninspired, even tedious at times, yet SH2 remains a deeply affecting and compelling experience. The attention to detail in the 'feel' of the game, along with the subtle, mature, and ambiguous storyline create a game of tremendous artistic unity, which represents a true formal leap in video games.

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