Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Silent Hill 2
Platform: PlayStation 2
Genre: Survival Horror
Release Date: America/Japan - September 2001, Europe - November 2002
Developer: Konami, Team Silent, Creature Labs (PC)
Publisher: Konami Digital Entertainment
Director: Masashi Tsuboyama
Art Director: Masahiro Ito
Scenario Writer: Hiroyuki Owaku
Drama Director: Suguru Murakoshi
Sound Director: Akira Yamaoka
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Introduction

Silent Hill is a psychologically unsettling game with a dark theme. Not all players have a taste for its subject matter and style, though players and critics still hold it in high regard and write about it often. Its story/gameplay interaction method is an old standard, and contains no conceptual leap or notable innovations in that regard. Nonetheless, it illustrates a successful solution to what may be the single most common barrier to invoking emotion through game narrative applicable to many genres, and many themes. This narrative review seeks to shed light on that barrier without proposing a single solution. Instead, it provides an example of a game that does not suffer from that common limitation, as support of the thesis. Finally, this review gives some general conceptual frameworks for possible application of the lessons learned.

Overview

The player character and main character of Silent Hill 2 is James Sunderland. Beyond elements crucial to the narrative, the game leaves the player to fill in the details of James' character traits. The effect is that James initially appears to be a 'normal guy' in an understandable state of depression over the loss of his wife Maria, who died due to illness three years before the game begins. His call to adventure is a letter he receives, apparently from his deceased wife. It claims that she is waiting for him at their "special place" in the town of Silent Hill. The game starts out with James looking at himself in a mirror, in a dirty bathroom, at night, in a building on a scenic overlook of Silent Hill. When he enters the town, he notices things are foggy and strange. Slowly, grotesque and oddly human-like monsters begin to appear. The sparse few people seem to be deranged or out of place; not the least of which is Maria, a woman who – at least physically - is a near twin of James' deceased wife. Before long, the player begins to wonder if this strange place even exists, or

if it is only a hallucination of a man who has irreversibly succumbed to psychological decay caused by his own grief.

Characters
- JAMES SUNDERLAND – The player character, main character and protagonist. He is decidedly average in size, looks, and age. He goes to Silent Hill after receiving a strange letter from his three years deceased wife Mary, who asks him to meet her there.
- MARY SHEPERD-SUNDERLAND – James' wife. She apparently died due to a non-specific illness three years before the story begins. Before her premature death, she was in every way a simple, caring, idealistic wife.
- MARIA – Physically nearly identical to James' wife Mary, and the second most prominent character after James. She claims she mysteriously awoke in Silent Hill, and is only looking for a way to survive. A shape shifter character type, she is sometimes caring, and sometimes aggressively demeaning. She wears a provocative, revealing outfit, reflecting her stark contrast to the humble, faithful Mary.

Breakdown
(Spoilers)
The narrative in Silent Hill is a nightmarish play on common western notions of women and romantic relationships. In a short but sufficient setup, the narrative portrays its protagonist as a lovesick victim, still struggling to find consolation years after the unexpected death of his wife due to illness. Throughout act two, it becomes increasingly clear that James is in fact struggling with his own sanity. Near the ordeal at the end, our ideas about James' benevolence finally die. It appears that because he was tired of supporting his wife as she suffered from prolonged illness, James actually murdered his own wife, then repressed the memory (some elements here vary depending on which ending is achieved. This review deals with the previously mentioned ending). The narrative implies that James' repressed memories cause the hallucinatory manifestation of Silent Hill, possibly as self-torture or some other type of hell as punishment for his actions. In the end, Maria, Mary's doppelganger, reveals herself as the face of James's torment, and in fact the antagonist in the (in this case) final ordeal, represented by a third, grotesque form of Mary. Regardless of whether or not James survives the ordeal, the truth, his bitter elixir and reward, is that he is condemned to this rightful place in his own personalized hell. There will be no reunion with his wife, an idea that by this point seems absurd, and no return to the happy ordinary world which James himself destroyed three years ago.
(End of spoilers)

The designers segment narrative and gameplay in a traditional cut scene/gameplay/ cut scene/gameplay/et cetera format. The story and plot successfully achieve their goals to intrigue the player long enough to give them some good psychological scares and emotional reactions. Of course, as in any good game, high quality design in multiple aspects supports immersion and emotional content. Sound effects, music, visual style and quality, gameplay, and narrative all come together to create an immersive entertainment experience. One could even argue that the clunky Resident Evil style controls added to the atmosphere of vulnerability and regular human-ness in a threatening environment. Obscured visibility,

strange sounds, high quality original music, disturbing enemies, disturbed characters, and a slow and utterly human player character give the player a strong sense of fear and intrigue.

Most importantly, Silent Hill 2 is effective at tugging on the player's emotions beyond just visceral fear. Players relate to the 'normal guy's' tragic circumstance. They want to know what is really going on in this strange place. They want to believe that Maria really is Mary and that James will break through her façade and find a way to reunite. They are conflicted and sickened when a cut scene finally reveals that James killed his own faithful and humble wife.

Strongest Element

The strongest element that supports the emotional content in Silent Hill 2 is that a character other than the player character is the most interesting and arguably most important character in the game world. Maria and her relationship to Mary, is more intriguing than the all but blank 'template' of a character that is James. His motivation to find, protect, and understand her is synonymous with finding comfort or closure to James' ongoing torment, and provides motivation comparable to the basic need for self-preservation. James illustrates this time and again when he dives into even greater danger in pursuit of these goals.

Unsuccessful Element

As with any game, Silent Hill 2 is not perfect. There are characters that seem disconnected from the core of the story. Angela Orosco and Eddie Dombrowski, two of the six in total, are more filler characters than supporting ones. Though their odd mannerisms are interesting and relevant to the theme, their backstories are apparently unrelated to the core narrative. They are successful if the goal is to create more somewhat interesting content, but unsuccessful if the goal is for them to be relevant additions to the narrative.

Highlight

(Spoilers)

The classic narrative highlight is when a cut scene finally reveals Maria as a manifestation of Mary. Throughout the game, conflicting information keeps the player guessing. For example, Maria was sometimes flattered and sometimes offended when the disoriented James would confuse her for Mary.

The biggest turning point, however, is when a cut scene near the end reveals James as Mary's killer.

(End of Spoiler)

Critical Reception

Generally, critics and players received the narrative in Silent Hill 2 very well. Critics called it "just as intriguing as the original… "(3), "a good, surreal story that's strangely heartbreaking"(2), and in a negative review (from an apparent Resident Evil fan), "never creates the pressing need to understand [the story] (1)."

- http://www.gamespot.com/ps2/adventure/silenthill2/review.html, Joe Fielder, score 7.7
- http://ps2.ign.com/articles/164/164904p1.html, Doug Perry, score 9.0 + Editor's Choice

- http://www.gamezone.com/reviews/item/silent_hill_2_ps2_review, jkmedia(admin), score 9.0

Lessons

Silent Hill 2 illustrates successful solutions to what may be the single most common barrier to invoking emotion through game narratives. Historian and moralist Lord Acton originated the saying "power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are always bad men." Designers commonly and often strongly believe they should always give player characters special abilities, special status, and great advantages. However, pandering is not the only one way, and not always the most effective way to make players want to play.

- Lesson 1

When the player character is the most interesting and/or special character in the game world, the player is very likely to feel more important than other characters within it. This is bad when seeking to invoke an emotional response.

Silent Hill 2 makes Maria the most interesting character, and gives her the most 'special' position, so players have more opportunity to react to her emotionally.

- Lesson 2

Players are real. By making the player feel more powerful and important than other game characters, they are likely to assume the roles and attitudes that may be more common in many powerful and important people in the real world.

Silent Hill 2 makes the player feel vulnerable. As with many games, often the player is actually far more powerful than his enemies are, so this is only a façade. However, it is an effective one. The result is that players feel tense and fearful throughout.

Summation

Admittedly, survival horror games have an advantage in that by definition they tend to place player characters in vulnerable situations. Silent Hill 2 is no exception. However, challenge is a core component of any good game, providing a consistent element that a game's narrative may be able to leverage.

In addition, in any game the player is by definition the most important entity. It may not be true however, that player characters should always be the most obviously special, powerful, or interesting entity in the game world. This is particularly important to address in games that intend to invoke an emotional response.

For example, the player character might be only one of a group of apparently equal super heroes, or super heroes in training. The player character may be an upstart among equal or even superior mentors, competitors, or enemies. The survival of another character, group of characters, or other entity in the game can be more important to the game world than the

survival of the player character himself. In any of these scenarios, there is far greater opportunity for the player to have an emotional response than the common approach. In this way, the player, through the player character, becomes a part of the game world, not a demigod of it.

Good narrative in games helps suspend disbelief, enhances immersion, encourages the player to invest more time, effort, and money into the game world, and most importantly can add meaning and value to the game experience. One possible way to increase the opportunity for effective game narrative; do not put the player character on a pedestal.