

HEAVY RAIN

Mental Illness, Relatable Archetypes, & the Beauty of the Mundane in Neo Noir Narrative Design

OVERVIEW

An Essay by Alexandra Lucas

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?** The Origami Killer yearns to find a father who can prove that he will go to any length to rescue his son, so he forces his victims' fathers to undergo five arduous trials, each marked by a clue written on a symbolic origami figure. 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 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. No single character can capture the Origami Killer on their own due to challenges presented by their respective mental illnesses, phobias, and addictions. However, 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.

Scott Shelby

"I'm a private eye; there's nothing I can't do."

Archetype: Broken Janus

Occupation: Private Investigator

Strengths: Calculating, Empathetic, Methodical

Challenge: PTSD

Ethan Mars

"No one's gonna stop me from saving my son."

Archetype: Hapless Father

Occupation: Architect

Strengths: Loyal, Loving, Determined

Challenges: Agoraphobia, Blackouts, PTSD

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."

Archetype: Tomboy Sidekick

Occupation: Photographer & Journalist

Strengths: Selfless, Helpful, Intrepid

Challenge: Insomnia

NOTABLE LESSONS

* **When developing new narrative experiences, 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.** Nearly every decision that the player makes 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.** 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, 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 addiction 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.

Norman Jayden

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

Archetype: Holmesian Detective

Occupation: FBI Agent

Strengths: Observant, Logical, Honorable

Challenges: Substance Abuse, Withdrawal Symptoms

"How far will you go to save someone you love?"