

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: *Faith: The Unholy Trinity*

Platform: PC

Genre: Retro Horror

Release Date: October 21, 2022

Developer: Airdorf Games

Publisher: New Blood Interactive

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Mason Smith

Overview

On September 21st, 1986, two priests approached the secluded home of the Martin family, responding to reports of strange behavior from the Martin's eldest daughter Amy. One hour later, only one priest would walk back out the Martin's front door. John Ward, the priest in question, was the only human survivor of the incident in the Martin home; and while Amy Martin would be incarcerated in an asylum for the murders that occurred that night, she was long past being considered human. The failed exorcism that resulted in the death of his ecclesiastical partner and the Martin family, as well as the damnation of Amy Martin's soul, would weigh heavily upon John Ward. His fear and inability to act in the face of adversity shook his faith to its core, and left the priest traumatized. However, exactly one year after the incident, John Ward would learn that Amy Martin had escaped her imprisonment. On September 21st, 1987, one priest walked alone through the forests of Connecticut and approached the Martin residence once again. Perhaps he returned out of a lingering sense of guilt, or perhaps he truly saw an opportunity to save the soul of another where he had once failed. Regardless of his reasons, John Ward returned to finish what he could not that night in 1986.

Thus begins John Ward's fight with the demonic, a battle waged not only over his life, but over his eternal soul – and perhaps the souls of all mankind. Hiding in plain sight, a fanatical cult has made a pact with the forces of hell, planning to summon the antichrist to Earth and raze humanity until only embers remain. The possession of Amy Martin was a critical step in their plan, and John's interference has placed him squarely within the sights of the cult and their entirely human leader, Gary Miller. To redeem himself for failing Amy, and to combat the unspeakable machinations of hell itself, John must rekindle his faith, find his courage, and stand in the light of God. Failure means death, damnation... and perhaps even indoctrination. Armed with only a crucifix and the guidance of the Lord, John seeks out the cult in an attempt to thwart their plans before they can complete their Unholy Sacrament, ushering in a swift end to humanity.

Characters

- **John Ward** – An anxious priest caught in a turmoil of faith, called to complete an impossible task. The story of *Faith* is catalyzed by John Ward's inability to overcome his own fear in the face of Amy Martin's exorcism: as such, John Ward is a character defined by his fear. As a game with multiple possible endings, *Faith*'s narrative is guided by John's response to this fear. In general, a "good" ending is achieved when John acts courageously, overcoming his fear through faith or conviction and facing the horrors before him with the word of God behind him. When John succumbs to his fear, allowing his faith to leave him and falling into despair, a "bad" ending typically occurs. Outside of his behavior within the narrative of *Faith: The Unholy Trinity*, little can be said for the content of John's life. It is known that he is from Palmyra, New York, and that he once had a wife. John's fight against the forces of hell is primarily motivated by his search for redemption: he seeks atonement for failing Amy Martin by attempting to unravel the plans of the demonic cult that orchestrated her possession.
- **Father Garcia** – A Hispanic priest strong in both faith and firepower. In many ways a character foil to John, Father Garcia is a bastion of faith within the narrative, never questioning the will of the Lord nor the nature of his calling to combat the forces of hell. When faith and prayer find no purchase, Father Garcia turns to buckshot, brandishing a

shotgun to combat the enemies of the Lord in a more direct sense. Garcia often acts as both a mentor and savior for John, guiding him from afar through letters and appearing with crucifix and shotgun in hand when John is in the heart of danger. The extent of Father Garcia's devoutness reaches beyond what many would consider to be moral limits, and he is not above dirtying his own hands if it ensures the salvation of others.

- **Amy Martin** – A normal teenage girl beset upon by a nefarious cult and an unrelenting demon. Prior to the events of *Faith: Chapter 1*, Amy was a normal 17-year-old girl living in rural Connecticut. She notably spent a considerable amount of time volunteering at a local clinic frequented by cult leader Gary Miller, which is presumably where she was possessed. Following the possession, Amy's behavior radically changed, with the once amicable girl becoming hostile and violent to all those around her. In the wake of John Ward's failed attempt at an exorcism, the demon within completely overtook Amy, leaving little of the girl's personality remaining – although her soul remained trapped within the vessel of her body. At some point the possessed Amy underwent a process referred to by the cult as the "Second Death," which left her face brutally disfigured, a gaping hole replacing all of her identifiable facial features.
- **Gary Miller** – A deranged cult leader who assures all who meet him that he is definitely human. Gary Miller is many things: a volunteer worker at a local clinic, the landlord of the apartment building at 665 Orange Street, the leader of the Cult of the Second Death, and above all else, a normal human. Gary serves as the primary antagonist within *Faith*, with his cult orchestrating the possession of Amy Martin and the arrival of the antichrist into this world. Gary's influence is largely seen in written notes left for John Ward or for members of his cult, with Gary only appearing in person in the final act of *Faith: Chapter 3*. There are two constant and reoccurring motifs surrounding Gary within the narrative: firstly, the repetition of the phrase "Gary Loves You," a sort of mantra for the cult; and secondly, a repeated insistence that "Gary is a normal human being, just like you." Unsurprisingly, neither statement can be considered truthful.
- **Nate and Jason Martin** – Two brothers swept up in a delusion of guilt and repentance. Nate and Jason Martin, usually referred to as simply "the twins" within the narrative, are the younger brothers of Amy Martin. The twins mysteriously disappeared following the failed exorcism at the Martin home in 1986. Guilt-ridden that he was unable to save their sister, John Ward is committed to braving the horrors of hell in order to find and save the twins from meeting a similar fate. Both John Ward and Father Garcia search for the twins throughout *Faith: Chapter 2* and *Faith: Chapter 3*, believing the cult is attempting to use the boys in a twisted ritual. In the conclusion of *Faith: Chapter 3*, it is revealed that the twins were a delusion fabricated by the late Cindy Martin, mother of Amy Martin. The twins were in fact miscarried, with Cindy Martin hallucinating them being alive due to severe psychosis. John Ward unknowingly buys into this delusion, convincing himself of the twins' existence. In the end, the twins are nothing more than a path to redemption that John has fabricated: endangered souls that are completely imaginary and exist solely for him to save, supposedly absolving himself of his past sins in the process.

Breakdown

Homage

Critical to understanding the narrative of *Faith: The Unholy Trinity* is an acceptance of the role of homage within the game. It is essentially impossible to separate *Faith* as a piece of

literature from the contemporary media that inspired its creation, as these inspirations fundamentally affect the presentation of *Faith*'s gameplay and narrative. Creator Airdorf has listed multiple sources of inspiration from a variety of mediums, with films such as *The Void*, *The Blair Witch Project*, and *The Exorcist III* serving as just a few of the guiding texts for *Faith*. Classic horror video games such as *PT* and *Silent Hill 2* were also listed as significant inspirations. The influence of these works means that the narrative of *Faith* treads familiar ground, following closely the tropes and cliches of the genre-defining texts which it emulates. Unlike other titles, *Faith* does not seek to break free from the bounds of its genre: instead, the title thrives within its genre's well-explored confines, guided adeptly by the pioneering media which it emulates. The result is a piece of media that is comfortable with its familiarity, able to utilize familiar tropes within its narrative freely to great effect, while still delivering an experience that is wholly unique.

Obscurity as a Catalyst for Terror

One of the strongest elements of both *Faith*'s narrative and gameplay is the game's ability to withhold information from the player, which is used to heighten tension and inspire terror. Whereas horror is a term that describes immediate fear or revulsion upon witnessing something, terror is defined as the rising fear and dread one feels when anticipating something frightening. In essence, horror relies on what is known to the audience, while terror swirls around what is unknown. While there are certainly moments of straightforward horror within *Faith*, the game truly capitalizes on inspiring terror, with nearly every element of the game lending itself to obscure detail from the player. This increases the range of what is unknown, and by extension the depth of the terror experienced by the player.

The very presentation of *Faith* may be the most powerful tool for obscuring player knowledge within the game. *Faith* presents as a classic Atari-era game, with a 192x160 resolution specifically made to mimic games on the Atari 2600. The game remains completely faithful to this art style throughout its runtime, with most characters and objects appearing as nothing more than sprites a few pixels wide. A few cutscenes show more detailed depictions of characters, but even these are presented exclusively through Atari-styled pixelation. This art choice results in ambiguity inside the player's mind as to the actual appearance of the characters on-screen. The lack of detail present on each sprite leaves significant gaps in the player's knowledge – gaps that the player's imagination fills with terror. The pixelated demonic antagonists of *Faith* give the player room to ponder and extrapolate, to clear the obscurity created by the art style with terrors of their mind's own creation. Nowhere is this effect more profound than in the Unspeakable, one of the primary demonic antagonists of *Faith*, and presumably the antichrist itself within the game's narrative. As the name suggests, the Unspeakable is literally a demonic entity that defies description: the few times the player encounters the Unspeakable, it presents as a chaotic mess of pixels and lines, all bloodred and seething. The lack of detail inherent to the art style leaves only the impression of the grotesque, yet it is just enough for the player's mind to conjure horrifying interpretations of their own making. The Unspeakable is the embodiment of a threat left in obscurity, its very form unspoken so as to be defined by the player's own terror.

The obscurity present in *Faith*'s art style extends beyond the detail of its sprites and into the functionality of its camera. Similar to many Atari-era games, *Faith*'s camera is immobile, requiring the player to walk to the edge of the screen before transitioning into a new scene. The entirety of *Faith* is essentially broken up into individual "sections," with the player only able to

see the scene within their “section.” The important effect of this camera behavior is that the player never knows what the next “section” will hold: they have absolutely no foresight beyond the limits of their scene. This obscurity creates apprehension within the player, as the potential threat awaiting just beyond the confines of their screen is forever unknown until it is too late to turn back. Every step forward becomes a leap of faith to an extent, the player delving directly into the terror of the unknown with each camera transition. This results in an ongoing internal narrative for the player, as they approach each new scene with growing apprehension and terror, which builds and then releases with each section. The player is engaging in a micro-narrative with each decision to push onward, with the driving question “Is it safe on the other side?” being posed, pondered, answered, and repeated with every camera transition.

Unreality and Nonlinearity within the Narrative

A major aspect of *Faith*’s narrative is the presence of nonlinearity and unreality within its story. Nonlinear story elements are portions of the narrative that do not abide by the regular laws of time or space. Flashbacks can be considered nonlinear story elements, with the jump between two points in time confusing the proper flow of the story and disrupting the narrative’s natural linear progression. Nonlinearity can also exist in a story space: for example, a hallway that loops forever in on itself, never reaching an end. In a similar vein, unreal story elements are those that exist outside of reality, and therefore cannot impact the narrative with the same level of clarity that actions occurring in reality do. Dreams are examples of unreality within narratives: the actions undertaken in a dream by a character do not carry forward into reality when that character awakens, and thus the actions committed in the unreal space of the dream do not have influence on the narrative progress that takes place in reality. Nonlinearity is often utilized to indicate that the narrative is occurring in an unreal space, as the often-impossible nature of nonlinear story elements can serve to highlight that reality is not functioning as expected.

Nonlinearity appears many times throughout *Faith: The Unholy Trinity*, both temporally and spatially. As he faces increasingly macabre demonic visages in his fight against the cult, John Ward often experiences brief flashbacks to the night of Amy Martin’s failed exorcism in 1986. It can be difficult for the player to determine when such a flashback has occurred, as they are often completely unindicated, taking place seamlessly as a player walks from one room to another. This is further confused by the several instances of spatial nonlinearity wherein the Martin household is somehow present somewhere that it should not be. The basement of the cult-occupied clinic, for example, consists of dark labyrinthian corridors that end abruptly in the living room of the Martin home, inexplicably reconstructed underground. This is only one of several replica Martin homes entombed beneath the earth that John Ward stumbles upon. The seemingly impossible placement of these identical Martin homes where they have no right to exist creates confusion between temporal and spatial nonlinearity: the player is unsure whether they are experiencing a seamless flashback, or whether the impossible structure they have found truly exists in this strange location. This heightens the sense of unreality surrounding the player’s circumstances, causing them to question whether their surroundings are real, and whether they are able to influence reality from their current situation. The ambiguous nature of their perceived reality increases the player’s uncertainty, in turn increasing the potential for terror. There are a few other instances of nonlinearity within *Faith*, such as the woods in *Faith: Chapter 1* looping on themselves infinitely, but the nonlinearity surrounding the Martin household is the most impactful example.

Unreality and narrative influence have a complex relationship within *Faith*. This is most apparent in *Faith: Chapter 2*, wherein after a long trek deep into the cult's territory, John Ward awakens in his bed and discovers the entire ordeal had been a dream. This raises a significant problem for *Faith*'s overall narrative: if the entirety of the chapter's contents took place in the unreal space of a dream, then every narrative event within that chapter must be irrelevant in the scope of the game's overarching narrative, which definitively takes place in reality and cannot be affected by actions undertaken in an unreal environment. In the majority of narratives, this would be the case: however, *Faith*'s narrative deals with metaphysical elements, and as a result is not strictly concerned with the "real" impact of narrative actions. *Faith*'s story primarily revolves around John Ward's search for redemption for his failure to exorcize Amy Martin. John's major failure in the 1986 exorcism was his cowardice, fleeing the Martin home before Amy could be purged of the demon possessing her. To atone for his transgression and redeem himself, he must find the courage he abandoned that night and face the demons of hell with bravery. Courage is a metaphysical attribute, being an abstract concept defined by a person's actions and behavior. As such, the development of courage is not an action strictly confined to reality. Within *Faith: Chapter 2*, John shows the buddings of courageous behavior, travelling deeper and deeper into the lair of the demonic cult and facing monstrosities completely of his own volition, all in pursuit of redemption. While John's actions are revealed to have taken place in an unreal environment, the intent and resolve he displayed was decidedly real. As such, even though it exists in an unreal state, the narrative of *Faith: Chapter 2* does serve as a tangible part of *Faith*'s overall narrative, and a corporeal step in John's character arc towards redemption. By centering its story around a metaphysical concept, *Faith* breaks conventions of unreal narratives by allowing real narrative progression to occur in spite of an unreal environment.

Similar narrative strategies supplement the role of the twins within the narrative, particularly with regards to John Ward's search for redemption. The twins are often cited as the primary motivation for John taking action against the cult, with John viewing the saving of the twins as the main way he can achieve redemption for his failure to save their sister Amy Martin. *Faith: Chapter 3* reveals the twins to be an illusion, a hallucination conjured by Amy's mother and unknowingly adopted by John as he desperately searches for a way to atone for his failure. The twins are an element of the narrative that is proven to be fundamentally unreal, and as a result it is easy to assume that the actions undertaken by John in service of securing their wellbeing were done in vain. Indeed, the game's primary protagonist, Gary, taunts John after revealing the truth about the twins' nonexistence, mocking the futility of his journey to save the souls of two people that never even existed. However, John's mission was not a futile one. He pursued the cult and attempted to stop them from harming the twins in an attempt to achieve redemption – removing the twins from this equation does not make the steps taken towards that redemption any less real. Even without the existence of the twins, by the conclusion of *Faith*'s narrative John has still reached redemption by overcoming his cowardice, standing courageous against the demonic where he once faltered. His actions not only prevented the cult from completing their ritual to summon the antichrist, but ultimately freed Amy's from the demon possessing it, finally allowing her soul to rest. The twins may be an unreal element of the narrative, but the actions John undertook in service of their rescue were tangible steps towards his redemption, and the outcome achieved properly corrects and atones for his past wrongdoing.

Narrative Engagement as a Character Arc

Despite being the central character of all three chapters of *Faith*, there are times when John Ward feels less like a free agent within the narrative and more like a passive observer. This is especially true early in the narrative. When John returns to the Martin home in *Faith: Chapter 1* to confront Amy Martin, he does so as though compelled by an unseen external hand; and while choice is a predominant element of *Faith: Chapter 1*'s ending, it seems John's choice is rendered inconsequential regardless of the path taken. Whether Amy is killed or spared, John is still haunted by her phantom throughout the entirety of *Faith: The Unholy Trinity*, his trauma unresolved and his guilt unassuaged. Ultimately, John is able to witness the narrative taking place, but unable to engage with it, being shepherded through *Faith: Chapter 1* with no ability to influence the outcome of the overarching narrative. In similar fashion, *Faith: Chapter 2* reveals itself to be an extended dream sequence, with John's actions having no permanence on the progression of the narrative beyond his own personal growth. John's role within *Faith: Chapter 2* seems almost explicitly to be that of the external observer, ferried through scenes of a grand story with no attachment or ability to inject his will into the narrative. The chapter begins with John surreptitiously appearing in an empty field, with no explanation for whence he came nor how he arrived. The chapter similarly ends abruptly after John's confrontation with an unholy spirit, with the scene cutting to black and John suddenly awakening in his bed. John is placed into an environment in which he has no attachment, experiences events over which he has no control and can express no influence, and is cut straight out of the story as quickly as he arrived. His role in the narratives of *Faith: Chapter 1* and *Faith: Chapter 2* is passive, being unable to exert his will upon the narrative.

John Ward's passive role as an observer is not a static one, however. While he remains unable to exert his will in *Faith: Chapter 2*, he at least attempts to be an engaged participant in the narrative – and were it not for the unreal nature of the events depicted in *Faith: Chapter 2*, he would have largely succeeded. In *Faith: Chapter 1*, John's actions are dictated by his fear and trepidation, unwilling to fully face the horrors that await him in the Martin household and by extension unwilling to play an active role in the narrative. *Faith: Chapter 2* shows John changing his behavior and becoming more active within the narrative, choosing of his own volition to press deeper into the nightmare before him out of a sense of responsibility and in search of redemption. While John was able to make choices in the previous chapter, *Faith: Chapter 2* is the first time within the overall narrative of *Faith* that John is able to express agency, facing the events of the story not because he has to, but because he chooses to. It is only due to the unreal nature of *Faith: Chapter 2* that John remains a passive participant within the narrative, able to make choices but not alter the actual events of the narrative taking place – although, as discussed above, his decision continue onwards in the face of adversity does have a profound effect on the metaphysical elements of the overarching narrative. However, John's passivity changes in *Faith: Chapter 3*.

Faith: Chapter 3 shows John Ward as not only an engaged participant in the narrative, but a willing instigator. John's experiences with the demonic and the occult in this chapter do not occur because he was drawn to or placed in a scenario as an observer; rather, every event in this chapter occurs because John actively chooses to engage with the narrative unfolding. *Faith: Chapter 3* is broken into three days. Each day, John receives a letter from Father Garcia regarding a location experiencing cult activity. By his own choice, John leaves his home to investigate these disturbances, putting his life at great risk in his search for redemption. This is much like *Faith: Chapter 2*, where John expresses his agency to progress deeper into a

nightmare; however, the agency John expresses in *Faith: Chapter 3* is much more explicit, with a literal decision being made by John at the start of each day. This newfound agency is also offered to the player: it is entirely possible for the player to decide not to engage with the narrative, returning John to his vehicle at the start of each day and leaving the scene without leaving any impact upon the story. Doing so results in an ending where demons overtake the Earth, and John regresses into grief and fear until he is literally dragged into hell. In this ending, Amy directly condemns John's attempts at redemption, declaring him to be "Unforgivable." This is in stark contrast to the "good" ending of *Faith: Chapter 3*, wherein John is able to banish the cult leader Gary Miller into hell and ultimately exorcise the demon from Amy's body, putting her soul to rest. With this ending, Amy delivers the redemption John desperately seeks, telling him, "It's okay. It's over now. They can't hurt me anymore." This ending is only possible when the player and John show active agency, choosing each day to confront the demonic in each location and overcome the tribulations awaiting them.

John Ward's development over the course of *Faith: The Unholy Trinity* into an active participant of the narrative able to express agency within the story mirrors the redemption arc he undertakes within the narrative itself. John seeks forgiveness for failing to save Amy Martin – a failure that only occurred due to an inability to overcome his own fear on the night of the exorcism. To achieve the redemption he seeks, John fittingly must overcome his fear throughout *Faith's* narrative. This can only be done by expressing his agency, actively choosing to face the horrors of hell head-on. Failing to become an active participant within the narrative and regressing into a passive onlooker results in the ultimate failure, a collapse of the possibility for redemption and the damnation of his very soul. It is only by avoiding the mistakes of his past and acting as a free agent that John is able to be saved. His journey from a passive to an active character is his true character arc, indicative of his overcoming of fear and acquisition of redemption through active agency. In this way, the narrative endorses agency as the road through which absolution can be achieved, highlighting John's choice to confront the demonic as the operative narrative element that transforms him from coward into savior.

Courage or Faith – The Dichotomy of Secular and Religious Narrative Interpretations Redemption Through Courage

When examining the overall narrative of *Faith*, it becomes apparent that the game is experiencing a continuous internal conflict. This conflict comes from the game's commitment to both the secular and the religious. *Faith's* narrative is one swimming with secular homage: it is a horror game that draws primary inspiration from classic horror cinema, with much of its narrative inspired by the "Satanic Panic" of the 1970s, and its art style referencing retro Atari games. At the same time, the narrative of *Faith* is attempting to earnestly depict Christian themes and messages. While authorial intent can often be discarded, it is worth noting that the game's creator Airdorf is a Christian Sunday-School teacher and former missionary, and he speaks frequently about the influence of his religion on the narrative of *Faith*. The acknowledgement of this influence does not immediately relegate *Faith's* narrative to religious propaganda – the inclusion and earnest representation of Christian elements does not necessarily mean that these elements are being promoted or endorsed – but it is information critical to the analysis of *Faith* as a whole. Acknowledging this conflict, *Faith* can be examined through two lenses: the secular, and the religious. Each lens significantly alters one's interpretation of *Faith's* narrative, and it is important to understand these different interpretations when discussing *Faith* as a piece of media.

The core theme and messaging of *Faith*'s narrative changes drastically when viewed through these conflicting lenses. When examining *Faith* with a secular lens, one clear overarching theme reveals itself as woven throughout *Faith: The Unholy Trinity*'s narrative: the idea that redemption can only be achieved through courage in the face of adversity. This interpretation is somewhat ironic, as the title *Faith* would seemingly imply that the redeeming trait required of its leading character would share the namesake of the work itself. Through the secular lens, the narrative's expressed insistence on the importance of faith is interpreted as a misdirect, resulting in messaging that is critical of the concept of faith while ironically heralding its importance throughout the story. Within this lens, John earns his redemption and overcomes the forces of hell not through building his faith, but by having courage in the face of adversity. While *Faith* is a game full of the demonic and the occult, the secular lens highlights the notable absence of any acts of God. There are no miraculous interventions or angelic beings to swoop in as John's salvation when he cries out in prayer. There are only the actions of John Ward, a single terrified man with a crucifix. John's prayers save neither himself nor Amy: but his courageous actions in the face of his own terror are the one path to salvation for all characters within the narrative. From the perspective of the secular lens, John's faith goes largely unrewarded, yet his courage influences the story towards a positive conclusion.

When examined through a religious lens, however, the core theme of *Faith* resonates with its namesake. The interpretation apparent through the secular lens is one that relies on the undefined nature of faith as a concept. From the secular perspective, this is a major flaw that erases the concept of faith from the discussion; from the religious perspective, faith does not need to be defined in order for it to be a real and impactful component of the story. John's actions can still be attributed to the tangible element of courage: however, his character development displays not a growth in courage, but a growth in faith that in turn allows him to be more courageous. Through the religious lens, it is John's faith in the Lord that enables him to overcome increasingly horrific tribulations, his trust in the power of the Lord that allows him to achieve redemption. The religious lens does not need miraculous interventions nor angelic apparitions. John's trials and his triumphs *are* proof enough of the divine, proof that the Lord will secure the salvation of his faithful through all adversity. Where the secular lens disregards faith from the narrative due to its unreal nature, the religious lens sees faith as a tangible influencer on the narrative regardless of its unreality. As a result, the religious interpretation of *Faith* does not criticize the concept of faith, but rather reaffirms it.

It is tempting to try to solve the conflict inherent in *Faith*'s narrative by deciding upon a "correct" interpretation. To declare that either the secular or the religious lens holds the correct viewing of *Faith*. There are tantalizing points in favor of either topic: the secular view, for example, examines only the tangible elements of the narrative, and therefore could be seen as the correct interpretation; or conversely, the religious view most closely aligns with the creator's stated intent and belief system, and therefore could be seen as the correct interpretation. Arguing for or against either interpretation misses a far more interesting discussion, however: whether these conflicting interpretations can coexist, and both be equally correct readings of the game's messaging. *Faith* is certainly a story that subtly criticizes the concept of faith through its depiction of a lone man achieving redemption through personal courage; however, *Faith* is simultaneously a story that espouses religious values, akin to a Christian parable in its depiction of faith as a virtue that guides its protagonist to salvation. These two interpretations are completely at odds with each other, and yet both are equally valid readings of the game's messaging. Surprisingly enough, both interpretations can coexist without undercutting the other.

Faith can be a secular text, or a religious one; its primary message can be about personal courage, or the power of faith. The text supports both readings, as does the game's creator: Airdorf has explicitly stated that the narrative supports both secular and religious interpretations. The elasticity of *Faith*'s narrative is truly its most incredible attribute: it allows for two conflicting interpretations to coexist without issue, and allows readers of either perspective to attain a valid reading of the text.

Strongest Element

John Ward's redemption arc and agency is by far the strongest overall narrative element of *Faith: The Unholy Trinity*, as it grounds the story of the game to more relatable human stakes. *Faith*'s narrative as a whole has rather high stakes, being a biblical battle between good and evil over the lives and souls of all those on Earth. Yet John is not driven by the looming threat of hell on Earth: rather, what pulls him into the narrative and thrusts him into the role of the protagonist is his desire to be redeemed. John's ties to the story are personal rather than grand, with the failed exorcism of Amy Martin being a far more profound motivator than the arrival of the antichrist. The narrative's focus on John's failures and personal redemption arc ground the story, altering the core narrative of *Faith* from one of grandiose religious pandemonium to a very human story about guilt, courage, and atonement. Stories focused on human elements are inherently more relatable than those with grander scales, and the narrative's focus on John as a character in search of forgiveness makes the story far more compelling. These more human elements are also very consistent and immediately comprehensible driving forces for the narrative's progression. The grand narrative within *Faith* really only has one driving factor: preventing Gary Miller's cult from summoning the antichrist. This grand motive is too large to be compelling in moment-to-moment gameplay and narrative beats: locations, conversations, and experiences melt together when all broadly defined by one singular large goal. Smaller, more human motives keep *Faith* engaging in these moments, breaking up the grand goal of halting the summoning of the antichrist into multiple smaller goals with more human ties. John enters an abandoned church in *Faith: Chapter 2* not to halt the cult's activity, but because he believes the twins are being held within the building. John visits an apartment building in *Faith: Chapter 3* not to combat the forces of evil, but because a dear friend is in danger. On the whole, John's redemption arc and the small human moments that drive him through the narrative are what ground the moment-to-moment story of *Faith*, creating a deeply personal narrative that supersedes the grandiose stakes of the larger narrative.

Unsuccessful Element

In spite of *Faith*'s very successful explorations of unreality, and its effective utilization of genre tropes and cliches in a way that does not negatively impact the overall narrative, the existence of *Faith: Chapter 2* as a dream sequence was not a successful element of the story, and serves as the weakest narrative portion of the game. *Faith* should not be criticized for delving into cliches, as the game exists largely as an amalgamation of homages to other pieces of horror literature. However, a twist-reveal that events within the narrative were in fact a dream, and therefore nearly inconsequential within the overarching story, is a painfully overused cliché that harms *Faith*'s narrative more than it supplements it. While the metaphysical nature of John Ward's character arc means that the character development present in *Faith: Chapter 2* is still relevant to the overall narrative of *Faith: The Unholy Trinity*, the unreality of the events within this chapter causes confusion that muddies the clarity of the story. For instance, in the dream

John meets and fights alongside Father Garcia against a faceless demon that claims to be the mother of cult leader Gary Miller. *Faith: Chapter 3* reveals that, in reality, John and Father Garcia have never met prior to the game's conclusion, and Gary Miller's mother lies dead and unpossessed within the cult of the Second Death's sanctum. While the unreal nature of the dream in *Faith: Chapter 2* excuses these obvious narrative confictions, it does not assuage the confusion experienced by the player. While the second chapter's dream may still serve to progress John's character toward redemption, the elements of unreality cause conflict within the presentation of the story, muddying the delivery of important moments and causing the narrative to become somewhat confused in the mind of the player.

Highlight

Near its conclusion, *Faith: Chapter 3* delivers an excellent twist which adds crucial context to John Ward's narrative of redemption and the overall narrative present within *Faith*. As John walks through the nightmarish and dark sanctum of the cult of the Second Death, Gary Miller's voice pierces the darkness, taunting John and beckoning him to descend into hell. Between scene transitions, a cutscene plays in which John calls into the darkness for help, crying out for anyone that can offer him salvation. From the darkness, a being of pure light appears and offers its aid to John. John can only cry out that he is afraid, and wishes to escape his current situation regardless of the cost. The being of light makes him swear an oath, proclaiming that "Her fate shall be sealed upon thine head," before vanishing. The next scene opens with John walking out of the Martin household to idling police cars, revealing this encounter to be a flashback to the failed exorcism in 1986. The being of light is later revealed to be the devil, taking advantage of John's fear to trick him into a deal.

This twist reveal contextualizes the guilt John feels and the extent of his failure when he abandoned Amy Martin. Not only was he unable to exorcize the demon from Amy, but he made a literal pact with the devil in order to save his own life and flee from the terrifying situation. The guilt John feels at Amy's fate is more than obligation: he is existentially accountable for her condition. John's deal with the devil also serves as a biblical parallel: his cowardice is not simply a moral failing, but the "original sin" of the narrative. It is the theological betrayal that catalyzes John's need for redemption, as the "original sin" in biblical mythos – the eating of the Fruit of Eden – catalyzed all mankind's need for redemption. As mankind's transgression caused them to fall from Eden, so too did John's fear cause him to fall from his faith. Ultimately this deal provides the full context for the redemption narrative that drives so much of *Faith*'s story: it is the true horror of John's failure, indicative of the full depth of his fall.

Critical Reception

Steven Scafie of Slant Magazine rated the entirety of *Faith: The Unholy Trinity* 4.5/5 stars, lauding the game's ability to create "a truly rare feeling of persistent uncertainty where anything can happen." Scafie's review focuses largely on the retro Atari 2600 styling of *Faith*, praising the game's low-pixel art style for its ability to build "its atmosphere on how unsettling it feels to deprive us of information," concluding that "the game manages to be frightening because of its technical constraints rather than in spite of them." Alongside praises for *Faith*'s art style, Scafie specifically mentioned "*Faith*'s masterful sense of timing and mood" as a highlight of the title (Scafie).

Echoing this sentiment, Austin Suther gave *Faith: The Unholy Trinity* an 8.5/10 in his review for TechRaptor. Suther also praises the game's unique art style and horrifying contents,

stating that “*Faith* certainly earns accolades for being an extremely unsettling game and a wholly unique experience.” The sound design of *Faith* was particularly impressive to Suther, with him remarking that “the soundtrack for *Faith* is by far one of the most sinister and disturbing scores I’d listened to in a while.” Suther specifically mentioned the soundtrack’s ability to cause the player to feel uncomfortable and unsettled, which he notes is “exactly what I expect out of a horror title.” In closing, the review also makes note of a few of Suther’s critiques of the game: namely, the combat, which he considers to be “the weakest aspect of *Faith*” leading to some “frustrating moments” (Suther).

In an article for Eurogamer, Robert Purchase gives a shining review for *Faith: The Unholy Trinity*, stating that the game is “smarter than it looks, deeper than it looks, scarier than it looks.” The focus of Purchase’s review is how impressed he is by *Faith*’s ability to deliver effective horror and complex puzzles through a seemingly rudimentary game engine: he summarizes his thoughts with the statement, “You don’t expect a game to be able to do this, but it can.” Purchase was also impressed with the immersion offered by the narrative, the promise of multiple endings tantalizing him with another playthrough. In the way of critique, Purchase found the slow movement and “tiresome traipsing around” to be the “main drawbacks in the game,” but notes that the frequent save points mostly alleviate these issues (Purchase).

Lessons

- **Genre conventions do not need to be disrupted.** While the presence of cliches and predictability within a narrative due to strict adherence to the tropes of a genre is often criticized as weak writing, sometimes a text does not need to break conventions in order to effectively deliver its narrative. *Faith* thrives in its contrivances, building its story and characters around well-established horror conventions and homages to inspiring texts from all mediums. The game’s adherence to the format of its genre does not weaken its delivery, nor cheapen the narrative experience: rather, *Faith* allows itself to be comfortable treading a familiar path, and as a result delivers a unique and compelling experience that is immediately identifiable as a product of its genre. Conventions, tropes, and cliches do not always need to be abandoned for a text to be effective: at times, accepting and building with those genre elements produces an equally effective narrative.
- **Obscurity incites terror.** One of *Faith*’s greatest achievements is delivering effective horror without the use of high-fidelity graphics. The game utilizes the limited visualization capabilities of its Atari 2600 style to depict low-resolution monstrosities that reveal just enough detail to spark the player’s imagination. Terror is fueled by the unknown, and by leaving the majority of its visual aspects obscured through retro-styled graphics, *Faith* ensures that every moment of its runtime is rife with terror. Pairing this low-detail art style with a camera that completely obstructs foresight into the next area leaves the player constantly anticipating the next horror they will encounter, building up the vague monstrosities in their mind. When it comes to horror media, providing the audience with less information results in more terror.
- **Human stakes are more compelling than grand stakes.** *Faith* depicts a narrative with cosmic-scaled consequences, with the stakes of every living soul on Earth at stake. However, this grandiose narrative takes a backseat to the smaller, more personal narrative of John Ward’s search for redemption. The antichrist and hell on Earth are consequences far too broad for the player to relate to: John’s own fear and guilt are deeply human, and immediately relatable, making the stakes of his individual journey much more impactful

on the player. The presence of a narrative deeply rooted in the humanity of the characters grounds the story, and gives players something more relatable to latch onto than incomprehensible stakes of a narrative with celestial implications.

- **Optional storytelling elements allow a player to engage with the narrative at their preferred level.** Much of *Faith*'s deeper narrative and worldbuilding is revealed through collectible notes that are scattered throughout the various chapters. These notes provide context for characters and locations, often revealing pieces of information that are key to reaching a deeper understanding of the narrative, but not a part of its straightforward delivery. The player could progress through *Faith* without reading any collectible notes, and the story would still be delivered as a full and complete experience. Those players who desire a deeper understanding of the events within *Faith*'s narrative have these notes as a way to unveil the more complex aspects of the story. The more complex elements of the narrative therefore must be specifically sought out by the player, while the straightforward narrative that carries *Faith* is immediately present for any player progressing through the game.
- **Conflicting interpretations of the game's core message can coexist with equal validity.** *Faith* can be examined with both a secular and religious lens, both of which will lead to very different interpretations of the game's core message. These interpretations seem to directly conflict one another, with a secular interpretation of the game finding a criticism of evangelical reliance on faith, while a religious interpretation finds an endorsement of faith as an optimal path to overcome adversity. Despite being directly at odds, both interpretations are valid, and the narrative of *Faith* supports either viewpoint. This allows individuals with vastly different perspectives and opinions to find valid readings of *Faith*, even if they may not find common ground on these interpretations.

Summation

Faith: The Unholy Trinity utilizes a familiar art style and familiar horror tropes to deliver an experience that manages to be uniquely terrifying. With art and gameplay that keeps the player in a constant state of uncertain terror, a narrative rife with nonlinearity and impossibility, and a protagonist facing a human struggle backdropped by truly biblical opposition, *Faith* tailors an experience that pulls the player in, enveloping them in the intricacies of its deceptively simple pixelated world. The retro graphics and seemingly straightforward narrative bely a horror experience that revels in tension and terror as no other title has managed, utilizing the restraints of its style to deliver a fear that is more complete and more consuming than any other piece of video game horror. John Ward's search for redemption in his fight against hell is as simple as it is elegant, a character arc defined by its relation to narrative agency and biblical parallels. Above all else, *Faith: The Unholy Trinity* is worthy of discussion because it is excellent in its simplicity. Its art, narrative, characters, and ability to incite terror all appear straightforward, but belie a complexity that makes *Faith* a truly transcendent work.

Citations

- Purchase, Robert. "Faith: The Unholy Trinity is the scariest 8-bit game I've played." *Eurogamer*, 27 Oct. 2022. <https://www.eurogamer.net/faith-the-unholy-trinity-is-the-scariest-8-bit-game-ive-played>
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- Suther, Austin. "Faith: The Unholy Trinity Review." *TechRaptor*, 31 Oct. 2022. <https://techraptor.net/gaming/reviews/faith-unholy-trinity-review>