

# Game Narrative Review

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**Your name (one name, please):** Xinyu “Layne” Zhang  
**Your school:** Southern Methodist University  
**Your email:** laynezhang05@gmail.com  
**Month/Year you submitted this review:** Nov 2023

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**Game Title:** Fatal Frame III: The Tormented  
**Platform:** PS2  
**Genre:** Adventure, Survival Horror  
**Release Date:** July 26, 2005  
**Developer:** Tecmo, Ltd.  
**Publisher:** Tecmo, Inc.  
**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** Makoto Shibata, Tsuyoshi Luchi  
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## Overview [1]

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The game, beginning with a series of mysterious scenes and dialogues in a montage, adopts a horror flavor. It narrates the story of Rei Kurosawa, a young photographer who has been suffering from nightmares every night since losing her fiancé in a car accident two months ago—a tragedy for which she was the driver. Each time she awakens from these nightmares, she discovers that tattoos are gradually appearing on her body. As the tattoo, akin to a curse, spreads across her skin, the line between the real world and the dream world becomes increasingly blurred. Consequently, the evil spirits from her dreams begin to intrude into her real life. Now, before succumbing to an eternal sleep and vanishing from the real world, Rei realizes that she must uncover and resolve the underlying cause of these events. However, as she delves deeper and gets closer to the truth, she learns that she is not the only one ensnared in these deadly recurring nightmares.

## Characters [1]

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- **Rei Kurosawa** – The protagonist and first playable character, is a photographer endowed with spiritual power, enabling her to see spirits. Following the death of her fiancé, Yuu Asou, Rei finds herself haunted by self-condemnation and a longing for the deceased. However, things take a turn when she encounters a figure resembling Yuu at the "Ghost Mansion" during her work, which triggers a mysterious tattoo gradually consuming her body, coinciding with deepening dreams. After enduring numerous nightmares, Rei realizes she is ensnared by a curse of dreams. Determined to free herself and other victims, she resolves to actively venture into the dream world in search of answers.

As the oldest girl among the female characters in the game at 23 years old, Rei exudes calmness, prudence, and responsibility. This is evident in her appearance—sporting clean, short hair—and in how she manages her emotions and her interactions with Miku, her young assistant. Rei keeps her grief, longing, fear, and despair to herself to prevent involving others. She prioritizes the well-being and safety of Miku and Kei (her fiancé's friend), drawing endless strength from this commitment. This strength becomes her anchor in the haunted house within the dreadful dream world, especially when she realizes they are in significant danger in their nightmares.

Rei uses the Camera Obscura, a device capable of capturing and pacifying surreal entities, to combat hostile spirits of normal strength.

- **Miku Hinasaki** – This Rei's 19-year-old assistant and a character from the previous series, is the second playable character. She appears young but shows remarkable maturity and empathy, especially in her unconditional support and comfort towards Rei. All her dialogues are tender, reflecting her kindness and efficiency as she quickly gathers information for Rei in the real world. However, Miku soon finds herself in the nightmare world due to Rei's influence and her own deep longing for her deceased brother. With her innate strong spiritual power, Miku wields a highly effective Camera Obscura and adeptly navigates confined spaces, thanks to her petite frame.
- **Kei Amakura** – A writer and Yuu's close friend, is the third playable character in the game. He investigates the urban legend "The Manor of Sleep" to save his niece Mio, who is trapped in a dream, and later collaborates with Rei, only to find himself imprisoned in nightmares. Kei is portrayed as a "brave warrior," evident from his courageous actions and firm, calm voice. However, his weak spiritual power results in a less effective Camera Obscura in combat. His distinctive trait is his physical strength, enabling him to move heavy objects and leap across large gaps.
- **Reika Kuze** – The final boss of the game, is the root of the curse. After her village's destruction, Reika was taken by the Kuze clan to become the next priestess. Her ritual involved tattooing blood ink symbolizing pain on her body to

bear the suffering of those praying to her. However, the ritual failed due to the immense grief and anger from witnessing her lover's murder. This failure unleashed the tattoo's power, cursing those who yearn deeply for their departed loved ones, trapping them in the dream world's Manor. Those unable to find hope eventually turn to ash and vanish from reality. Initially depicted as oppressive and terrifying, Reika's character evolves as the story unfolds. Her tragic but kind nature is gradually understood, moving from fear to empathy among those who learn her true story.

## **Breakdown**

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The narrative unfolds through flashbacks, revealing two intertwined storylines across generations: the origin of the curse (Reika's history) and its impact on current events (the main storyline with Rei, Miku, and Kei). The focus primarily stays on Rei, but the perspective shifts to her friend Kei and assistant Miku, as dictated by the player.

This approach interlaces their individual stories with Reika's memories from the past, guiding the parallel storylines to a convergence in later stages. The game subtly changes the environment to reflect the encroachment of the dream world into reality, effectively building tension, driving emotional engagement, and increasing immersion without words. By fragmenting information across cutscenes, dialogues, character actions, combat, items, and environmental cues, the game piques the player's curiosity, encouraging exploration and discovery.

In the first chapter, the author presents a direct scene of a car accident where the protagonist survives, but another person does not. Two months later, Yuu's figure reappears in front of Rei during her photography work in an abandoned house, gradually unveiling the deceased's identity and the reason behind Yuu's reappearance from Rei's perspective.

This scene, while initially unclear about the deceased's identity, suggests a significant connection to Rei. This technique, common in narrative-driven games, offers an intriguing foreshadowing and then slowly reveals more secrets, immersing players in the characters' experiences and emotions.

Following Yuu's steps, Rei arrives at an unfamiliar house, where she first encounters Reika and sees her limbs pinned down. Waking up from what turns out to be a dream, this sudden shift in environment and atmosphere signals to the player that something is amiss, sparking curiosity about Yuu's mysterious behavior.

The introduction of Reika in a cutscene as an oppressive and frightening figure deepens the mystery and emotional impact, effectively drawing players into the storyline and setting the stage for the unfolding narrative.

Rei falls asleep and once again enters the house in her nightmare, where she's attacked by evil spirits. During an unexpected encounter, she meets another woman who is suddenly covered in tattoos and screams as Rei wakes up in terror, finding tattoos beginning to appear on her own body. As she calms down, she remembers the car accident scene where Yuu, her fiancé, lay in a pool of blood.

This moment marks the first exposure to the nightmare's curse for both Rei and the player, as the curse begins to unfold with further dream encounters. The cutscene clarifying Yuu's death brings a mix of surprise and fear, piquing interest in the unfolding story and setting the stage for Rei's future pursuit of Yuu in the dream world.

In subsequent dreams, Rei encounters the tattooed woman again, realizing she is also trapped in this cursed world. With the help of Miku gathering real-world information, Rei slowly comes to understand that these dreams are not mere searches for Yuu but a life-threatening curse.

This realization, coupled with witnessing the tattoo-covered woman disintegrate into ashes in a hospital bed, serves as a pivotal moment in the narrative. It showcases the impact of the curse on reality and reveals the ultimate goal: to find a way to break the curse and survive.

Upon waking, Rei finds Miku humming a melody from her dream and receives a report from Kei about the curse. This scene fuels speculation about Miku's affliction by the curse - has Miku also been affected by the curse? However, it's Rei's profound sadness and grief that the narrative emphasizes, especially evident in a tearful shower scene and her interactions with Miku. The player senses Rei's deep but unreachable longing for Yuu and the panic and guilt over involving Miku, setting the stage for the story's climax.

Later, as Rei repeatedly enters the dream world, she assumes the roles of Miku and Kei, realizing she's experiencing their nightmares and that the curse has spread to those close to her. As the dreams intensify and the tattoos spread, the boundary between Rei's reality and the dream world blurs. She starts witnessing supernatural phenomena in her actual life, creating a palpable sense of danger.

This part of the narrative effectively disrupts the player's sense of safety, conveying the urgency and the looming threat as the dream world increasingly encroaches upon Rei's reality. The atmosphere of this section is strong enough, and the author effectively disrupts the sense of safety in the subconscious and gives the player a chilling feeling that danger is already lurking around. In this way, without saying a word, the author makes it clear and straightforward for the player to notice conveying the urgency and the looming threat as the dream world increasingly encroaches upon Rei's reality.

Miku and Kei are in an unawakeable sleep, leaving Rei to fend for herself. Utilizing the information gathered by Miku and Kei, Rei bravely enters the dream world for a direct confrontation with Reika. After triumphing in this final battle, she encounters the spirit of her fiancé Yuu heading towards the netherworld. Rei attempts to join him, but Yuu insists

“Only if you die too, I will be truly gone”. He removes the painful tattoo from Rei, symbolizing her pain, and departs alone to the netherworld.

This moment marks the climax of the game, portraying Rei's emotional journey vividly. Her transition from fear and hesitation to determination highlights her sense of responsibility and inner strength, especially as she faces the ultimate decision with Yuu. The confrontation and Rei's helplessness in Yuu's arms reveal her vulnerability in love, adding depth to her character. The cutscene, set against a hauntingly beautiful nightscape and poignant background music, underscores the tragic end of their love story, leaving a lasting impact on the player. This stark contrast in Rei's personality, shown through her actions and emotions, enriches her character and brings the story to a powerful and emotional conclusion.

The narrative structure of this game uniquely blends suspense with traditional storytelling. It introduces the protagonist into a cursed nightmare world, culminating in an emotional climax when danger impacts those around her. This climax, though less action-driven compared to earlier boss fights, triggers a deeper psychological peak, creating a profound emotional resonance with players. The game employs a fragmented narrative, embedding information in various elements beyond dialogue, such as objects, interactions (entrusting Miku to investigate), sounds (phone calls, etc.), and environmental cues. Particularly effective is the use of Camera Obscura, which allows for close-ups that reveal additional story layers.

Character switching is another pivotal narrative tool. By exploring the backstories of each character and their reasons for being trapped, the player gathers information from all perspectives, essential for comprehensively understanding the storyline. These techniques not only enhance character portrayal but also accentuate contrasts within the narrative. Furthermore, this kind of switching also gives the player more varieties to advance the game, given that different characters have different abilities. In terms of combat, the distinctive weapons and action capabilities of different characters provide varied combat experiences, catering to diverse playstyles. This amalgamation of varying narrative perspectives and gameplay methods is further enhanced by continually offering players a sense of novelty, thereby stimulating their desire to continue playing and exploring. Additionally, the players' weapons and unique mechanics are integral to the narrative (e.g., abilities corresponding to the character's physique, spirit, backstory, personality, etc.). As a game, it masterfully blends heavy narrative elements with gameplay, ensuring that both aspects complement and enhance each other.

A notable feature at the start of each chapter is the montage cutscene of Reika's story, initially heightening the game's horror atmosphere. As the game progresses, the player's fear of Reika diminishes, and these cutscenes begin to piece together her story, encouraging players to further explore and fill in the gaps of the narrative. This approach ingeniously balances mystery and revelation, leading players through a journey of fear, discovery, and empathy.

## **Strongest Element**

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The game's narrative strength lies in its blend of linear and non-linear storytelling, including fragmented narratives and flashbacks, which collectively enhance exploration, character development, and player engagement. The story is dispersed into fragments, with linear narrative offering just a skeleton at crucial points, urging players to fill in the gaps through exploration. Each narrative piece, although fragmented, is strategically placed to make the storyline more compelling and interconnected at key moments.

For instance, unraveling Yuu's story involves exploring the dream world and uncovering the curse, which is intricately linked to the interaction between the dream and real worlds. This interaction draws Miku and Kei into the curse, leading Rei to investigate the curse's truth to save them. The necessity to enter the dream from Miku's and Kei's perspectives, and their entrapment in the curse, becomes a pivotal trigger for Rei's decision to confront Reika. In defeating Reika, Rei's encounter with Yuu brings the story full circle, echoing its beginning. To navigate this complex narrative, players are required to go beyond the linear plot points provided by the author and actively piece together the fragmented narrative, gaining a comprehensive understanding of the story, including its backstory – the cause of the curse in the previous generation.

Additionally, the game expertly integrates a wealth of information into non-textual elements such as visuals, audio, objects, speaking styles, psychological & mood changes, and behaviors. For instance, the tone of a character's voice is used to enrich their personality, and changes in the environment subtly indicate the progression of the story and the game's current mood.

Moreover, the game deliberately utilizes varying narrative perspectives to conceal information that cannot be known or interpreted from certain angles. This approach creates suspense, guiding players to explore further. As players control different characters to navigate the story, they continually uncover new aspects of the same narrative. This technique effectively binds seemingly unrelated parallel storylines, revealing their interconnectedness as the game progresses. The use of diverse perspectives not only adds depth to the storytelling but also enhances the player's engagement by encouraging exploration and discovery.

## **Unsuccessful Element**

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One of the game's shortcomings is its complex system of occult and folklore terminology, which is mostly presented in text form, posing a significant understanding challenge for players. This complexity can deter players from fully engaging with the plot. A potential solution is to incorporate visual aids, such as graphics or videos, to make this information more accessible and comprehensible.

Another issue is the game's consistently slow pacing, particularly in the middle and later stages when crucial plot elements are about to unfold. This prolonged pacing can lead to player frustration, diminishing the story's appeal. Introducing additional mini-climaxes or

turning points within these stages could help maintain player interest and prevent monotony.

Aside from that, the "spirit touch" mechanic, which randomly triggers when collecting items and can lead to losing non-essential items, presents a dilemma. Since all interactable items, crucial or not, are indicated in the same way (light blue shimmer), players might avoid collecting items to evade jump scares, thus missing out on narrative fragments. Differentiating important items (narrative pieces) from trivial ones (normal pickups) in their presentation could resolve this issue, ensuring that players don't miss out on key story elements while avoiding unnecessary scares.

The last issue concerns the game's fixed 3D perspective, perhaps a result of technological and developmental constraints of its era. Each room in the game is presented from a predetermined camera position. This approach offers certain advantages: it allows players to adjust their sightlines exactly as the designers intended, ensuring that meticulously crafted scenes are not missed. Additionally, this perspective subtly introduces a sense of voyeurism, aligning with the game's horror theme to enhance the feeling of fear.

However, this locked perspective has its downsides. It can diminish player immersion and reduce freedom, thereby weakening environmental storytelling to an extent, since the environmental narrative elements can only be deliberately concentrated within the camera's field of view. For instance, the discovery and interpretation of seemingly incidental narrative fragments in the environment can evoke strong emotional responses in players, stimulating them to engage more in collecting these narrative elements, thereby creating a positive feedback loop in environmental exploration. Moreover, changes in environmental objects when viewed from different perspectives or at different stages can significantly enrich the narrative impact and content of the environment. This aspect is somewhat limited by the fixed camera angle, as it restricts the ability to view these changes or understand their varied meanings.

## **Highlight**

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In the final scene, Rei chooses not to seal Reika but instead holds her hand with her beloved to fulfill her last, unadulterated wish. As Reika's wish is realized, she gazes upon her deceased lover and gently closes her eyes, finding solace in a sleep that suggests she will never awaken again. This moment echoes a previous memory where Reika witnessed her lover's death during a ritual; back then, she opened her eyes in despair and cursed the world. Now, she internalizes her pain and slowly closes her eyes, remaining silent throughout the process. This poignant scene sharply contrasts with Reika's earlier portrayal as a symbol of horror and fear, demonstrating a nuanced approach to character development. Through this narrative technique, the game showcases the diversity and complexity of its characters, highlighting Reika's transformation from a figure of terror to one of tragic serenity.

## Critical Reception

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**Jeremy Dunham**– 7.8/10 [4]

It's presented by Jeremy Dunham that Fatal Frame III takes a more coherent but disjointed narrative than the previous series, in which it takes different layers to satisfy various levels. Furthermore, it's also argued that the story in the game contains many mysteries inviting to the players yet also contains cheap scares in between. In addition, the reviewer makes a great compliment on the "two-world" relationship that makes advancing through traversing between different worlds a necessary but interesting experience. The part the reviewer liked the most is the final chapter of the game which is described as "pretty captivating" [4] and "moves the story along through the perfect combination of subtle and blatant plot devices" [4]. However, one thing that's disputed is that Fatal Frame III takes a long time to build up between the high points.

**Lee Baxley** – 8/10 [5]

It's described by Lee that the stories in this series are always "very good, very deep, and very creepy" [5], and "the way this title links all of the Fatal Frame games together is truly brilliant" by continuing the story of the characters from previous generations into this one, and intersecting them with the main character of this story, which not only "ties up the loose ends left over from the previous games" [4] but also "manages to create a few brand new questions" [4]. It is also highly supported by Lee that this game, instead of bringing only the main story of the protagonist, also gives players a great back story which may be even dated back several generations to the main character, and every ghost has its own tale told by newspaper clippings and other information mediums.

## Lessons

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- The game excels in using various narrative forms beyond just words, such as environmental changes and layouts. For instance, the setup of Rei's workroom suggests her connection to photography, while her bedroom's appearance hints at her recent struggles and professional competence. As the game progresses, the evolving environment reflects her growing distress, effectively conveying her emotional state to the player.
- Another narrative strength is the use of multiple playable characters, each experiencing similar events but uncovering different secrets. This approach not only adds complexity to the narrative but also encourages players to think from diverse perspectives. Rei, Miku, and Kei each explore parts of the truth using their unique personalities and abilities, enriching the storytelling experience.
- Furthermore, the game intertwines multiple conflicts, each linked to another, forming an underlying network of tension beneath the primary conflict. The initial



conflict of the deceased fiancé leads to the curse, which in turn creates the intertwined worlds, affecting Miku and Kei and eventually circling back to the curse's origin and the fiancé. This intricate web of conflicts, along with Miku and Kei's personal struggles, adds depth to the main storyline, transforming a standard narrative into a compelling, multi-layered, and explorative journey.

## Summation

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Fatal Frame III presents a prime example of integrating fragmented and environmental narratives with FPS-style combat. The game requires players to collect information through combat, exploration, and changing perspectives, focusing on gathering not just text but also non-textual elements such as visuals, sounds, items, speaking styles, and behavioral patterns. This approach not only forms a solid narrative structure but also emphasizes how the game intricately weaves information into everyday objects, dialogue styles, decision-making, and psychological changes. By doing so, it enriches the story's complexity, interest, and depth, making it more engaging for players. It encourages a deeper exploration of the game world through these rich narrative layers.

## References

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