Loss, Guilt, and Restless Dreams:

Representing the complex emotions of grief through gameplay and narrative in *Silent Hill 2*

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to identify the way in which the complex notion of grief is expressed in the videogame *Silent Hill 2*. This research builds upon works by Sabine Harrer and Jonathan Frome. It takes their assertions into new directions, tackling specifically the expression of emotion through predominantly ludic elements of videogames by adding to them a symbolic narrative dimension through contextualization within the overarching narrative. Furthermore this thesis argues that this symbolic narrative dimension becomes only available to the player after a certain familiarity is reached with the game, throughout multiple playthroughs.

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Introduction

Death is an ever present aspect of our daily lives, and the representations of death in art often serve as mortal reminders. Throughout the many centuries that humanity has consciously dealt with the concept of death, our attitudes towards it has changed many times. Philippe Ariès and Patricia Ranum tackle the different attitudes towards death in their book *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*. Attitude shifts towards death are most clearly shown in the artistic representations of death (58). Whether it is represented in a solemn or banal manner, like in the Late Middle Ages "Danse Macabre" genre of paintings, or given an incredible amount of respect, like in Emily Dickinson's *Because I could not Stop for Death*, our attitudes towards death have always found their truest expression in our works of art.

Death and videogames, however, have quite a complicated relationship. Fairly early-on in videogame development a convention was established that would shape the connection between the medium and the notion of death for years to come: on-screen character death became a signifier for failure. Since this convention has been established innumerable games have been created that play into this established trope. When falling in a pit in *Super Mario Bros*. (Nintendo, 1985) you die and have to start from the beginning of the level. This can be seen in Jesper Juul's essay *The Art of Failure* in which the majority of examples of failure that are mentioned, such as *Limbo* (Playdead, 2010) and *Pac-Man* (Namco, 1980), end in the death of the player character (16). As videogames grew from a relatively small medium to a commercial powerhouse and the technology for creating and playing games advanced significantly, new avenues of expression opened up for game developers. With the possibility of more complicated narrative structures and processes, the established notion of death within

videogames was challenged; games that depicted death in a more serious and impactful way became (more) commonplace.

These depictions of death, however, remained fairly limited in scope. Games like *Final Fantasy VII* (Square Enix, 1997) tackled death through a single instance of permanent death of a playable character. This sudden removal of a staple character from the playable cast left a deep impression on many players of the game. In *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar North, 2010) the game's main character John Marston meets his untimely demise by the end of the game. The game gives control to the player and allows them to try and take down as many enemies as they can in a shootout that is similar to many of the gun battles that happened in the game prior to this one, but the end result in this one is always death, and there is no retry. Though these representations are powerful, they lack the multifaceted approach that a complicated concept such as death requires.

Death is an emotionally complex phenomenon, so much so that the process of dealing with death has its own name: grief. Grief is also complex, the grieving process differs from person to person, and the emotions that one can feel in relation to it are numerous, ranging from disbelief, shock, and numbness to anger, guilt, and sadness (Semple and Smyth, 388). Videogames should be capable of expressing this complicated process in a more diverse way than the previously mentioned games have shown to do, specifically because their procedural nature allows them to represent process with process (Bogost, 14).

In this thesis I will be analysing the survival horror videogame *Silent Hill 2* (Konami, 2001) in order to look at how this game is able to represent the complexity of the grieving process. *Silent Hill 2* represents various emotions through multiple different elements within the game, combining both elements with a dominant ludic function, such as the aspect of failure, puzzles and enemies, and elements with a dominant narrative function, such as cut

scenes and in-game texts, to convey the events that transpire within the town of Silent Hill. Furthermore I would argue that the game introduces new narrative elements in such a way that multiple playthroughs are necessary for players to understand the symbolic nature of many of its different aspects. There are many questions that *Silent Hill 2* asks the player regarding death, guilt, loss and much more, but in their initial playthrough the player is often unaware of these questions and ill equipped to answer them. For this analysis I will identify some emotions that are related to death, or more specifically to the grieving process, then I will focus on how the various different elements that comprise *Silent Hill 2*—such as the overarching story, the characters, environments, puzzles, and enemies—either express this emotion in relation to death, or are symbolically related to the narrative expression of these emotions. Finally I will also have to look at how the impact that the player's actions have on the game's expression of these emotions, but also the necessity of the player's familiarity with the game's intricacies factor into the importance of multiple playthroughs for a complete understanding of the game.

Silent Hill 2 is a game that invites players to unpack its narrative, to exhaustively look through its in-game environments and experiment with the possibilities that the game offers, because each of these elements can potentially offer a breakthrough in how the player looks at the various events that transpire as the game progresses. The various different endings of the game represent different facets of the complicated grieving process, and these endings are directly related to actions that the player takes within the game. In some ways the player is then responsible for helping the protagonist deal with the grief that he feels in relation to the death of his wife, and the manner in which the player helps him can ultimately decide the conclusion of his grieving process. In my analysis I will be looking at the specific ludic and narrative elements that help to create this symbolic representation of the emotional complexity of grief.

In my theoretical framework I will first complicate the notion of expressing complex emotions through narrative in videogames, by looking at texts that doubt that this is possible. I will then resolve this complication by referring to other theorists that have tackled the expression of emotion in videogames. Finally I will identify in what ways emotion can be expressed within videogames.

Theoretical Framework

Marie-Laure Ryan following a thought about an interactive experience the likes of Tolstoj's *Anna Karenina*, where the end goal of the game would be to commit suicide, came to the conclusion that it would be impossible for games to portray a tragedy such as this. She felt that "any attempt to turn empathy, which relies on mental simulation, into first-person, genuinely felt emotion would in the vast majority of cases trespass the fragile boundary that separates pleasure from pain" (6). Ryan here assumes that catharsis through tragedy is not possible in an interactive medium, because there is little to no distance between the subject of the tragedy and the consumer. She feels that catharsis is dependent on being able to compromise your position in relation to the plot, seeing it both from the perspective of the characters themselves as well as realizing we are merely onlookers. "We simulate mentally the inner life of these characters, we transport ourselves in imagination into their mind, but we remain at the same time conscious of being external observers" (5-6). She feels that this is not possible when playing a videogame, because in a videogame you are hardly ever a passive external observer. Ryan suggests that the existence of cut scenes—moments in games where players are indeed passive external observers—as primary carriers of important narrative information "brings […] further evidence to the claim that interactivity is not a feature that facilitates the creation of narrative meaning" (12). I argue that, though these cut scenes do indeed oftentimes carry most important narrative information, they can also serve

contextualize certain predominantly ludic elements, highlighting their symbolic relation to the overarching narrative. Her critical stance towards narrative expression in games does not mean that Ryan objects entirely to the possibility of narrative within videogames, quite the opposite, she states in her conclusion that "the inability of literary narratology to account for the experience of games does not mean that we should throw away the concept of narrative in ludology; it rather means we need to expand the catalog of narrative modalities" (15). She believes in the narrative capabilities of videogames as such, but she feels that videogames express this narrativity in a different manner than the media that came before it, and though I agree with her on this point, I feel that she underestimates the narrative capabilities of games.

In her article Marie-Laure Ryan states that "the player of a game is usually too deeply absorbed in the pursuit of a goal to reflect on the plot that he writes through his actions" (12). This is something that Espen Aarseth mentioned in *Cybertext*, he states that "the effort and energy demanded by the cybertext of its reader raise the stakes of interpretation to those of intervention" (4). By forcing the player into a position of intervention, the game directs the attention of the player towards taking action. This could indeed mean that a player foregoes interpretation of their actions due to their focus on completing the goals of the game. There is a possibility that this issue can be resolved by designing around it. In games like *Uncharted* (Naughty Dog, 2007) and *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics, 2013) the main character is supposed to be a hero as per the narrative, but by the end of the game they will have the blood of hundreds of generic adversaries on their hands. The player is busy with completing their goals and thus never doubts the narrative fixture of their character as the hero, but René Glas suggests that this ludonarrative dissonance is not an inherent quality of videogames. According to Glas, by taking more explicit care when designing specific aspects of a game, designers can solve certain instances of this ludonarrative dissonance and create new possible avenues of narrative expression within digital games. When taking the time to marry the idea

of these enemies with the general themes of the game or by fleshing out their personalities they can become meaningful additions to the narrative of the game (35). Any obstacle in a game can be represented as something more than just a mere obstacle, and in doing so the player will be more likely to interpret their actions in relation to this obstacle. In this thesis I will show that components that initially seem to have a predominantly ludic function such as, fail-states, generic enemies, or puzzles, can gain a symbolic narrative dimension.

Sabine Harrer tackles one of the many ways in which death can be expressed in videogames and how this expression can create meaning. According to Harrer it is important to note that losing in a videogame cannot accurately model the feeling of loss, "because losing is not a structural affordance of loss; it is an affordance of game progression" (609). This shows that oftentimes for a death to be impactful in its relation to the player in a game it must come from a source outside of the player character, such as an important side character or perhaps party member. Falling in a pit multiple times does not accurately represent the feeling of loss oftentimes associate with the notion of death, so she calls for "games to refrain from the dying convention and introduces the need to look for the procedural, fictional and metaphorical equivalents of real life experience" (611). She posits that death can be meaningful perhaps even more so in the context of videogames than in other forms of media because of the player's direct interaction with the game world. But in order for death to become more meaningful in game environments its importance needs to shifted from a state of losing to a state of loss. The three different games that she looks at all show a similar linear structure in which the player first gets used to the new addition to their direct environment then it is taken away from them, but certain elements remain to serve as a reminder of their loss—such as a gravestone in *Passage* (Jason Rohrer, 2007), a greyed out character portrait in *Final Fantasy VII*, or a button on the controller that no longer serves a purpose in *Ico* (Team Ico, 2001). From this she ascertains that "playability is thus a game's key affordance of

profound loss: the pain is not that you lose, the pain is that you must continue" (619). I feel that this is an astute observation, the emotional impact of certain aspects of a game can be amplified by having this be expressed through both ludic and narrative elements. I do feel, however, that death as failure can also express certain more poignant symbolism. While Harrer suggests that games should move away from the dying convention, I feel that perhaps, like the killing of generic adversaries, this convention can also be framed more interestingly to create a symbolic meaning. Such as for instance in the videogame *Braid* (Number None, Inc. 2008) where dying in failure and using the rewind mechanic of the game to fix your mistakes becomes more symbolically meaningful when looked at in relation to the overarching narrative.

Jonathan Frome suggested that there are different aspects of a videogame to which a player might respond emotionally, and these various aspects all carry with them different kinds of emotions (832). He identified four different types of emotion that games can elicit which seem to be loosely based on Ed S. Tan's work in film theory: game emotion, narrative emotion, artefact emotion, and ecological emotion. Game emotion is "directly related to [the player's] performance," so when winning or losing in a game one feels happy or sad (832). Narrative emotions are "based on a videogame's characters, settings, and events," they are felt in relation to anything happening within the narrative of the game (832). Artefact emotions are "emotions of aesthetic evaluation," or emotions felt in relation to the game as an art object (833). Finally, ecological emotions are emotions "generated when a player responds to a videogame in much the same way she responds to the real world," such as being scared of events that transpire within a game, even though there is no real danger for the player (833). I would like to expand upon this idea by saying that it is possible for certain game elements to hide narrative emotions from the player until a certain familiarity is reached with the game's processes. In that sense it would be possible for certain more game specific

elements to become symbolic of certain narrative emotions. This requires the player to play the game multiple times, allowing them to become familiar with the various nuances of its processes; this would allow the player to move from what Espen Aarseth defined as the "stakes of intervention" to interpretation. When a player is no longer pre-occupied with reaching the game's goals, but rather with understanding its intricacies, they can reach a new understanding of the game. This shift in player approach is necessary in order to understand the narrative of *Silent Hill 2* more completely.

I suggest that becoming more familiar with a game's various elements and intricacies—a sort of going native (Vught and Glas, 11)—can allow a player to more clearly interpret the various elements of the game, by adding a symbolic narrative element to many predominantly ludic elements. As is the case in Harrer's examples, games can use their more ludic aspects to accentuate certain narrative events to drive home their emotional impact. These primarily ludic elements—like the gravestone, the greyed out character portrait, or the button without a purpose—become symbolic of the emotion that is expressed through the narrative.

Method

In order to show how this symbolic representation of narrative within predominantly ludic elements happens in the game *Silent Hill 2* I will be using textual analysis as defined by Clara Fernandez-Vara, in the form of a close reading as defined by Bizzochi and Tanenbaum. A textual analysis is an analysis of the formal elements of a text. In my case the text is a videogame, and as such the formal elements consist of the "rules and goals of the game […]; game mechanics; spaces of the game; fictional world of the game; [and the] story" (Fernandez-Vara, 88). In my analysis I will take into account the procedural as well as the

more semantic elements of the game in an effort to more clearly highlight how these two aspects work in harmony to represent multiple possibilities of dealing with death.

My analysis will be based on my experiences with *Silent Hill 2*, which I have played exhaustively in an attempt to understand everything that it has to offer. This exhaustive knowledge will allow me to perform a close reading as defined by Bizzochi and Tanenbaum. For this kind of close reading I will have to assume a specific dual stance in relationship to the game.

> On one level, the scholar enacts the play of a naïve gameplayer—one who is encountering the game as a fresh participant. This perspective is open to all nuances of the experience and ready to absorb the game without preconceptions. […] At the same time, the scholar is—and must be—distanced from the experience. She must bring an objectivity to the observation of her own experience and faithfully remember and record a wide range of critical details. From this perspective, she plays the game in a state of hypermediation—an awareness of the fact of mediation. (275)

I have introduced many people to *Silent Hill 2* and watched them play through the game with a fresh pair of eyes; these experiences have in turn informed my own view of the game on the level of the naïve game player.

This kind of close reading is necessary because there are many separate elements within *Silent Hill 2* that can have a large impact on the understanding of the narrative, and thus an exhaustive understanding of the game will help me identify these elements. In turn I need to also be able to show how someone unfamiliar with the intricacies of the game will not be able to understand these symbolic emotions. Even after playing through the game

multiple times, players can still find new information in the cracks and seams of the game that can shed new light on the established narrative.[1]

Doris C. Rusch in her close reading of *Silent Hill 2* argued that James' trek through the misty streets of Silent Hill is not an actual journey, but rather a metaphorical representation of a psychotherapeutic process: "[*Silent Hill 2*] does not portray an objective reality, but a projection of James' mental state onto the game-world" (239). In Rusch's eyes the town of Silent Hill that is represented in the game is not in actuality a town, but "the projection screen for the inner journey. It is a spatial metaphor for the mind" (240). If read like this, the many different vistas, objects, and obstacles that James encounters through his journey through Silent Hill become symbolic of his emotional journey through this psychotherapeutic process.

The revelation at the end of the game sheds a different light on the preceding events in the game, and playing through the game a second time with the awareness of James' culpability in his wife's death can have a large effect on the player's understanding of the various different elements of *Silent Hill 2*. Certain things that would not warrant a second thought in the initial playthrough now become pivotal elements for understanding James' mental struggle. Though it could be possible for a player to become aware of James' culpability and mental struggle through reading paratexts, like Rusch's article, but I contend that it is not only this knowledge but also a certain familiarity with the game's various predominantly ludic elements that create a broader understanding of *Silent Hill 2*'s narrative. In addition I also feel that an awareness of the three possible endings and what they represent is a necessity in order to fully understand James' emotional struggle with the death of his

[1] During the process of writing this thesis I have gained many new insights in relation to the narrative within *Silent Hill 2* and my views in relation to the various elements of the game have changed numerous times throughout.

wife. Subsequent playthroughs are necessary in order to reach a more complete understanding of what many of the objects and obstacles in the game symbolically represent.

I will be dividing my analysis into seven parts, each focussed on a different element of the game. The first part will primarily be concerned with the general story of *Silent Hill 2* as well as the three main endings of the game. The second part is focussed on the main character James. The third part will be focussed on the game's fail-state. The fourth will be focussed on the various non-player characters that the player comes across in their journey through Silent Hill. The fifth part will be focussed on the enemies that wander the misted streets of the town. The sixth part will be concerned with the various objects, texts, and puzzles are strewn about the town of Silent Hill. Finally the seventh part will look at the various different spaces of Silent Hill.

Chapter One: Story and Endings

In *Silent Hill 2* the player takes control of James Sunderland, a man in his late twenties who came to the town of Silent Hill looking for his deceased wife. Though obviously impossible, his wife had sent him a letter from beyond the grave stating that she was waiting in the town of Silent Hill, in their 'special place'. James and the player venture deep into the misted streets of this lakeside American town in search of his wife and during their travels come across all manner of strange things such as mind bending puzzles, dangerous monsters, and other troubled individuals. After many different trials James and the player finally reach the conclusion of the story, in which it is revealed that James' wife Mary did not die of "that damn disease" as James had stated in the beginning of the game, but rather by the hands of her own husband. James frustrated with the drawn out process of his wife's death, no longer content with seeing her in pain and frustrated with his own desires not being met by the frail woman that used to be his Mary, had decided to put her out of her

misery. His long journey through Silent Hill was part of the process of coming to terms with his own actions in relation to his wife's death.

The different endings

There are three different ways in which the story of *Silent Hill 2* can conclude. All of these endings have a clear relation with the different stages of grief that Elisabeth Kübler-Ross identified: denial, depression, bargaining, anger, and finally acceptance (37, 49, 79, 83, 109). The different endings can be reached by adhering to the very specific sets of rules that each of them requires the player to follow. These rules are related to minor in game actions taken by the player that indicate a certain attitude towards the events that transpire within the game, and the narrative that it unfolds.

The "In Water" ending can be related in some ways to the stages of bargaining and depression. With the "In Water" ending, the game ends with James taking his own life in order to atone for his sins in relation to the death of his wife, as well as in an attempt to join Mary in the afterlife. In order to reach this ending the game requires the player to play in such a way that it seems to indicate an attitude similar to the one James expresses early on in the game when he says: "I guess I really don't care if it's dangerous or not." By not healing damage immediately after it is taken—by only taking the necessary precautions when death seems inevitable—the player increases their chances of reaching this ending. Another way to increase their chances is by inspecting anything that seems to in some way relate to the destruction of the self, such as texts relating to suicide, and the knife given to them by Angela. By mimicking what Taylor and Fink describe as the pathological mood—"[a] pervasive and unremitting apprehension and gloom that colors all cognitive processes, resulting in a loss of interest, decreased concentration, poor memory, slowed thinking, feelings of failure and low self-worth and thoughts of suicide"—the player increases their

chances of ending the game with the James taking his own life (15). James during this ending, in his depressed state attempts to bargain with his life, exchanging it for the possibility of seeing his wife again. Ultimately it is the combination of James' undeniable sadness, his self-destructive tendencies, his wish to see Mary again, and his readiness to accept his blame in relation to the death of his wife that drives him toward suicide.

The "Maria" ending can be related in some ways to the stages of denial and anger. If the game ends on the "Maria" ending James leaves town with Maria, the figment that he conjured up in his mind due to his sexual frustrations during his wife's sickness. As they leave town, Maria coughs loudly—a cough that immediately reminds one of Mary's sickness—which indicates that James is about to repeat his mistake by denying himself the opportunity of moving past what happened to his wife, by diving headfirst into a mirror image of that relationship. The player can steer the conclusion of the story into this direction by being protective of Maria when she follows them around Silent Hill, keeping her healthy and out of harm's way. Another thing the player can do to reach this ending is to not listen to the full conversation that is played right before the last fight. In this conversation Mary is heard lashing out in anger towards James, but by the end she expresses regret and tearfully asks for James to return to her: "Stay with me. Don't leave me alone. I didn't mean what I said. Please James… Tell me I'll be okay. Tell me I'm not going to die. Help me…" If the player quickly crosses the hallway in which the conversation can be heard and exits the room immediately, only the part in which Mary is angrily screaming at James is heard, vindicating James' anger towards Mary, denying her apologetic stance in the later part of the conversation. By showing affection towards Maria through their actions and focussing on Mary's anger towards James, justifying his hatred towards her, the player can steer the conclusion of the story towards James leaving town with Maria. In the lead up to this ending James confronts the figment of Mary that awaits him at the top of the Lakeview Hotel. She is

angry with him, and pokes straight through his lies about wanting to see her, stating abjectly: “You killed me! […] Don’t make excuses James, I know I was a burden on you. You must have hated me that’s why you got rid of me.” To which James replies: “It’s true. I may have had some of those feelings. It was a long three years, I was… tired.” His anger towards Mary allows him to shift the blame for what happened to her. Led by his anger towards Mary he denies his own guilt, and denies the loss he went through by replacing Mary with her mirror image, Maria.

The “Leave” ending is primarily about acceptance, it shows James leaving Silent Hill with the young girl Laura, which implies that he decided to adopt her like Mary had wanted to according to the letter she had sent to Laura. In this ending we see James talk to a bedridden Mary who shows him forgiveness for what he did to her, telling him: “Please… Please do something for me. Go on with your life.” She allows James to move on from what he has done, forgiving his actions towards her. In order for the story to reach this conclusion the player must take good care of James’ physical wellbeing, healing as soon as they take damage. The player can also show James’ continued infatuation with his late wife by on occasion inspecting the photograph of Mary that is in their inventory as well as the letter that she sent him. By showing affection for his late wife and a willingness to continue living, the player can steer the game’s conclusion towards the “Leave” ending.

The three endings tie into the special kind of agency that *Silent Hill 2* gives the player. The player decides through their play who James is, filling in the gaps in his personality with their own actions. James in the beginning of the game is filled with every emotional possibility, but it is ultimately the player’s decisions that guide his psychotherapeutic process into a specific conclusion. Doris C. Rusch mentions this in her close reading as well, stating: “The game provides the player with some basic info about James (e.g. misses dead wife; might have some sort of amnesia) but what she does with this info is up to her. The player's

behavior and playing style completes James' personality, and determines who he is" (251). It is precisely this combination of game focussed and narrative focussed elements—where the actions of the player become symbolic of certain aspects of the story—, and how they combine to convey a complexity of emotion in relation to death that ultimately this thesis is about.

Chapter Two: James

On the bed inside of a barely lit bedroom lies a frail shell of a woman. She coughs softly, as the man who sits beside her looks at her, powerless to help her. "I told you that I wanted to die, James," she says, "I wanted the pain to end." "That's why I did it, honey," James responds "I just couldn't watch you suffer." He averts his gaze, unable to look her in the eyes. "No… That's not true…" he says, "You also said you didn't want to die. The truth is… Part of me hated you. For taking away my life…" "You killed me and you're suffering for it. It's enough, James."

By becoming familiar with the different endings, as well as the various symbolic representations of certain emotions through other elements within the game through multiple playthroughs, the player can gain a certain familiarity with James' emotional state. Gaining insight into the character of James and the various emotions that he struggles with in relation to his wife's death is pivotal for the player's complete understanding of *Silent Hill 2*'s narrative. In this chapter I will take a closer look at the various emotions the character James expresses in relation to his wife's death.

James is struggling with the death of his wife in two ways, he is struggling with the hole she left in his life when she died, and he is struggling with his own responsibility in relation to this death. All of the stages of grief mentioned by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross are in some way present in James' mental struggles, but unlike the typical model—which sees hope

as the overarching emotion of the process of grief—I feel that James more than hope has a tendency towards guilt, another common emotion one can feel in relation to the death of a loved one. He is guided through his journey within Silent Hill by his feelings of guilt, and through this guilt is able to tackle the other emotions he may feel in relation to the death of his wife.

Some of the emotions that James most clearly struggles with in relation to the death of his wife are depression and anger. In her book Elisabeth Kübler-Ross talks about the prevalence of anger in the process of grief: "The process of grief always includes some qualities of anger. Since none of us likes to admit anger at a deceased person, these emotions are often disguised or repressed and prolong the period of grief or show up in other ways" (6). James had grown a certain kind of anger towards Mary in the three year that she was sick. Due to her illness their relationship had become unbalanced, he was giving her everything and she could give him nothing. There were also times when she would lash out to him during his visits. The conversation from one of these visits can be heard in a long hallway close to the end of the game in which Mary tells James: "Leave me alone already! I'm no use to anyone. I'll be dead soon anyway. Maybe today, maybe tomorrow. It'd be easier if they'd just kill me. But I guess the hospital is making a nice profit off me, they want to keep me alive. Are you still there? I told you to go! Are you deaf?! Don't come back!" Her bluntness towards James, his yearning for things she could no longer give him, and the general dependency of Mary on James all lead to a growing hatred towards his wife, a hatred that at least in part pushed him to killing her.

James also very clearly struggles with depression, his demeanour in many of the cut scenes of the game shows an uncaring attitude towards his own wellbeing. When another person points out that his journey into Silent Hill might be dangerous he tells her: "I guess I really don't care if it's dangerous or not. I'm going to town either way." This low self-worth

and self-destructive tendency is a symptom associated with depression (Taylor and Fink, 15; Amy E. Latham et al., 350). Besides this a deep sadness can be heard in James' every word, he sounds exasperated with life; the loss of his wife has clearly had an effect on him. Though depression is clearly an emotion James feels in relation to his wife's death, it is actually not something he expresses as clearly as his anger. His depression, rather, finds its representation rather in some of the other parts of the game, such as the non-playable characters that James meets, the puzzles he has to solve, and the objects and texts that he comes across on his journey through Silent Hill. In the next few chapters I will tackle these various aspects of the game and how they inform the player's conception of the narrative, and their conception of James' character.

Chapter Three: Failure

Within the narrative of *Silent Hill 2* there is a specific focus on James' personal emotional growth. The game mechanic of dying as failure when seen in relation to the overarching narrative factors into this theme of personal growth. If James takes enough damage during his journey through Silent Hill and neglects to heal himself using the various means available to him it is possible for him to perish. In this sense the fail state of the game is fairly similar to other games of the sort, after dying the player is sent back to the menu and has to start again from a previous save. Saving is done by interacting with red piece of paper that can be found all over Silent Hill, and though this is not by itself interesting, the first time James interacts with one of these red squares he says: "Looking at this makes me feel like someone's groping around inside my skull… It gives me a weird feeling." Doris C. Rusch sees this quote as making the piece of paper symbolically meaningful in relation to her reading of the game as a psychotherapeutic process. "[These pieces of paper] fit the metaphor of psychological archaeology and can be interpreted as milestones in the process of

discovering the truth" (241). If read like this, failure on the players part can be seen as James failing to confront his demons and having to start over from one of these milestones.

At certain points within *Silent Hill 2* butterflies make an appearance, Maria has a tattoo of a butterfly on her abdomen, and a few butterflies can be seen flying around in a specific room in the Woodside Apartments. In many mythologies the butterfly represents a form of rebirth (Butterfly Lore, Baylor University). Souvik Mukherjee tackles the notion of dying and resurrection as it pertains to videogames. In his paper he argues against forcing the conception of death as "grim finality" onto the representation of death in videogames, as there are plenty "equally serious [views] of death and endings that [have] so far been largely ignored due to an occidental bias," namely those that pertain to the idea of reincarnation, or rebirth (1). He mentions that the term avatar, which is often used in relation to videogames, also relates to this idea of reincarnation and notes that "its key connotations of reincarnation and immanent existence have so far been ignored" (1). When taking this view into account the metaphorical death and rebirth of James during his psychotherapeutic process can seem like fitting fail-state for a game that is all about personal growth. In this way the game adds a new narrative dimension to the principally ludic element of the fail-state.

Chapter Four: Non-Player Characters

During his trek through the town of Silent Hill James comes across many different characters. Though most of these characters have their own personal stories to deal with, they all in some way relate to James and his personal struggles. Eddie and Angela specifically go through a similar ordeal as James, having to deal with guilt in relation to their own respective murders. They in some ways reflect James' emotions, and can create awareness within the player and in James of the destructive nature of these emotions. They, like James in some way deny their guilt.

The characters of Maria and Laura are more directly linked to James' story. Maria is a figment of James' imagination, conjured up during the three long years in which Mary could not tend to James' more carnal desires. Laura is a young girl who shared a room with Mary in the hospital. Mary and Laura became fast friends, and Laura—like James—is looking for Mary in Silent Hill. In this chapter I will take a closer look at these different characters and how they serve to inform the player's idea of the narrative.

Angela

Angela is the first character James comes across in his journey through Silent Hill. Within this first conversation a clear link is already drawn between James and Angela. Like James, Angela is looking for someone in Silent Hill. This parallel between her and James becomes even stronger when later in the game it becomes clear that she is also guilty of a murder. Her demeanour throughout the game seems to be similar to what is described by Taylor and Fink as a pathological mood, which "is expressed as pervasive and unremitting apprehension and gloom that colors all cognitive processes, resulting in a loss of interest, decreased concentration, poor memory, slowed thinking, feelings of failure and low self-worth and thoughts of suicide" (15). She is forgetful at times, rather gloomy and oftentimes slow at expressing herself – most clearly though, she deals with low self-worth and thoughts of suicide.

When we come across Angela the second time in the Blue Creek Apartments she is lying on the floor in front of mirrored wall staring at her reflection with a bloodstained knife in her hand. She looks at the reflection in the blade of her knife, as if mesmerized by it, so much so that at first she does not even notice James entering the room. When she notices James she abjectly says: "Oh, it's you," not taking her eyes off of the blade of her knife. James, painfully aware of the situation says: "I don't know what you are planning, but there's

always another way." Angela sighs and almost breathes out an annoyed "Really?" The tension in the scene is palpable, it is the first direct allusion to suicide in the game, but what makes it really interesting is that Angela immediately compares her predicament to James': "You're the same as me," she says, "it's easier to run. Besides, it's what we deserve." Angela serves as a reminder of the feelings of depression that James is dealing with, she reminds him of issues that lie dormant in his mind.

Eddie

Inside one of the rooms of the apartment complex James comes across a gruesome scene, a bloodied mutilated body lies inside an open refrigerator with legs sticking out; somewhere not too far off a faint sound can be heard. In the bathroom of the same apartment James finds a portly young man huddled over a toilet, losing his lunch over—presumably—the gruesome scene in the kitchen; this man is Eddie Dombrowski. When Eddie becomes aware of James' presence in the room he is quick to deny his culpability in the presumed murder, "It wasn't me!" he says, "I didn't do it!"

Eddie is a young man presumably aged somewhere in his twenties who found his way to Silent Hill after fleeing his hometown because he committed a crime. He starts the game off like a somewhat dopey, but innocent looking goofball. Later on in the game he reveals a new side of him, a side that is no longer content playing the victim. When James finds Eddie sitting next to a corpse inside a canteen he asks: "You killed him?" At first Eddie attempts to play the role of the innocent young man again, stating: "But it wasn't my fault!" This time, however, he shifts the blame towards the victim, instead of denying culpability altogether: "He made me do it. […] That guy, he had it comin' … I didn't do anything, he just came after me! Besides, he was making fun of me with his eyes! Like that other one!" As the conversation continues Eddie grows angrier, at one point even directing his anger towards

James. The character Eddie, much like Angela, functions as a sort of mirror to James, they reflect a different part of his inner emotional struggles; Angela represents depression, Eddie represents anger.

Maria

Maria is a representation of James' desires for a healthy and sexy wife. She looks much like Mary, but has blonde hair, and wears more revealing and overtly sexualized clothes. Maria is a figment of James' imagination; a being conjured up to help him cope with his responsibility in the death of his wife. Her more sexual looks and tendency as well as the implication she works in an erotic dance club called Heaven's Night place her into a role of wish fulfilment. She was likely conjured up by James' imagination as Mary's more promiscuous side during his sexually frustrated years by the bedside of his deathly ill wife. Doris C. Rusch also addresses this in her close reading of the game, in which she states: "Maria is a fantasy. She's a result of James' longing for a healthy, sexy wife – an idealized version of the late Mary" (249). In light of this reading the multiple deaths that Maria suffers throughout *Silent Hill 2* can be attributed to James' psyche, and the way in which he is forced to deal with his responsibility in his wife's death.

When playing the game the player is not exempt from feeling guilt in relation to Maria's death. During a chase sequence in a long hallway in the basement of the hospital, an enemy chases after James and Maria with a spear in his hand, ready to strike at either of them. At the end of the chase James manages to run into an elevator door, but before Maria is able to enter the doors start to close. Both characters frantically attempt to open the doors as the monster slowly inches closer. The panic of both characters reaches a fever pitch as the terrible sound of metal piercing flesh can be heard and Maria's body goes limp. The doors close as James remains the sole survivor, once again. During the chase sequence the player is

mostly concerned with the end goal, preoccupied with surviving the ordeal and not so much with saving Maria, who is lagging behind, with death breathing down her neck. When the player finally reaches the elevator and is confronted with Maria's death, they cannot help but feel responsible. The game in this way mimics the feeling of guilt that can be associated with the death of a loved one, Tilghman-Osborne et al. state that guilt in relation to death is often linked to "moral transgressions (real or imagined) in which people believe that their action (or inaction) contributed to negative outcomes […] A sense of responsibility and painful feelings of remorse are part of the guilt" (544). And though there is no real way for me to alter the events that transpire in the hospital basement I still dread this moment every time I play through the game.

If we look at Maria's first death in relation to Sabine Harrer's article "From Losing to Loss" we see that losing Maria in *Silent Hill 2* can be seen as a strong representation of loss. Her death causes a "permanent disruption […] followed by a slight change of gameplay patterns" (618). After Maria tags along, the player has to take care of her. If she succumbs to wounds inflicted by either the player or enemies, the game will end in a fail state and the player will have to start from a previous save. When she dies, the absence of Maria is felt more strongly because she was at one time a fixture in the gameplay patterns of the player. In this sense there is an overlap between the more ludic aspects, and the narrative of the game that leads to a highlighted feeling of loss.

Laura

Laura is a young girl that, like James, roams the streets of Silent Hill in search of Mary. Laura in some ways can be seen to represent James' denial. She, unlike the other characters in the game, seems to see Silent Hill as an unthreatening place, innocently playing in its foggy streets, covering its walls with crayon drawings of smiling yellow suns and

friendly animals. Laura dislikes James because during the time she shared a room with Mary in the hospital she saw the effect that he had on Mary. During this time she grew a dislike for James, because she as an eight-year-old girl could not understand his complicated relationship with his deathly ill wife. On multiple occasions in the game she inhibits James' progress toward the conclusion of the game. In the apartment buildings Laura kicks away a key from James' hands, forcing him to take a much longer route to find a way out of the building, and in the hospital she locks James inside one of the rooms, stopping him from continuing his journey. These actions can be seen as her acting on her dislike of James, but when seen in relation to the overarching narrative they can also be read as her attempting to shield him from the truth that he will find by the end of his journey.

Chapter Five: Enemies

Silent Hill 2, like many other games, uses standard enemies to hinder or even block the player's progression through the game. At first glance these enemies may seem like any other generic adversaries—their monstrous representations just fitting the general theme of the game—, but once the player is more aware of the intricacies of James' mental struggle the shapes and demeanours of these monsters becomes more symbolically meaningful. Like René Glas suggested, by giving the monsters a more direct relation to the overarching narrative of the game, their existence becomes more impactful than just that of mere obstacles. The most prevalent enemies that James comes across in Silent Hill are those that represent in some ways a sexualized female figure with some manner of mutilation; some that look like a woman sewn together with a straight jacket, making oddly sexual jerking motions while spitting acid at James; others look like two pairs of feminine legs sewn together at the stomach; and others still look like female nurses with bandaged faces wearing a revealing uniform with a push up bra. These mutilated representations of the sexualized female are

manifestation that can be seen in relation to James' sexual frustration and the violent act he committed due partly to these feelings; they represent ever present doubts about his true motivation for killing Mary. They can also be seen as either a reminder to James of his reprehensible thoughts and handling of his wife's illness, or a representation of James' tendency of hatred towards women because of his wife's inability to satisfy his needs. Them popping up in James' psychotherapeutic process signifies him dealing with these feelings, and the player's choice in ignoring these enemies or taking the time to kill them can be seen as indicative of how the process takes place: either James ignores these gnawing feelings of doubt, or faces them head on.

Pyramid Head

Another incredibly important symbol within the narrative of *Silent Hill 2* is the enemy referred to as Pyramid Head. This musclebound entity is referred to in such a way because its head is in the shape of a giant red pyramid. It wears a butcher's tabard, white gloves and drags behind it a giant knife or spear. "In combination, the cowl and the knife conjure up images of executioners from past times and indeed, that's what he's supposed to represent" (Rusch, 249). Pyramid Head embodies that which James hates about himself in relation to his responsibility in the death of his wife. In many ways Pyramid Head can be seen as a direct representation of James feelings of guilt in relation to the death of Mary. James states in the final battle versus Pyramid Head: "I was weak… That's why I need you… Needed someone to punish me for my sins…" This manifests itself in the way Pyramid Head is responsible for killing—not once, but twice—the character Maria. Maria's deaths at the hands of Pyramid Head invoke the idea of mental self-flagellation, James forcing himself to relive those emotions of responsibility he felt in relation to his wife's death.

Chapter Six: Objects, Notes, and Puzzles

Many of the objects and puzzles that the player comes across in their journey through the town of Silent Hill are related in some way to James' emotional turmoil in relation to Mary's death. They can serve as a carrier of narrative symbolism as much as they can serve as gameplay specific elements. Some notes or objects in the game serve both to flesh out the story-world as well as help the player move towards puzzle solutions, and some puzzles can serve as both an obstacle for player progress as well as a projection of important symbolism in relation to the overarching narrative.

The "Patient's Diary" atop the Brookhaven Hospital reads like the diary of a person struggling with depression, it mentions among other things an unrelenting rainstorm, medication and an unwillingness to keep going, all of which can be linked to depression, it is also one of the objects that can help push the conclusion of the story towards the suicide of James. The knife that Angela gives to James after their chance encounter in the apartments is also linked to depression, specifically to suicide. By the end of the game Angela asks for the knife back, it is implied through this request that she wants to finally end her own life. James refuses to give the knife back to her and she taunts him: "saving it for yourself?" She accuses James of the same suicidal tendencies. All of these objects and notes serve to support the narrative elements to create an understanding within the player of James' struggle with depression.

Some of the puzzles within the game also represent the emotion of guilt. Some conjure up the emotion of guilt purely through their imagery, such as the coin puzzle. There is a coin that is referred to in the text of the puzzle as the woman, but when looked at in the inventory the coin is titled "Prisoner", a name that can be attributed all sorts of different meanings. One that I personally subscribe to is that the name of the coin refers to Mary as the

prisoner which in turn alludes to the guilt James feels for how he acted towards her during the years of her illness. At the same time the anger that James feels towards Mary is also represented in some way in the coin puzzle. There are various different configurations of the placement of the coins in the grid that can solve the puzzle, but in almost every configuration the “Snake” coin is linked to the “Prisoner” coin. If we consider once again that Silent Hill is a projection screen of James’ psyche than this link between snake and woman can be seen as a sort of anger towards the fairer sex, linking the woman to the original sin.

One specific puzzle located in the labyrinth tasks the player with saving an innocent man from the gallows. In one room six corpses hang on six nooses, their faces covered with a piece of paper which states their specific crime: murder, kidnapping, embezzlement, counterfeiting, bodily injury, arson, thieving, or swindling. In another room the player finds, a clue, a poem, and six empty nooses – the positions of the nooses corresponding with the positions of the hanged men in the other room. The clue states that in order to solve the puzzle the player needs to identify the wrongly convicted person from the poem and pull down the corresponding noose. When interacting with one of the nooses to pull it down a small cut-scene will play in which James slowly pulls the noose down, and the way in which the camera is angled makes it seem as if he is pulling the noose over his own head. This framing almost implies that James offers up another guilty man for the gallows, himself, to free the innocent man.

In many ways these puzzles can further add to the player’s understanding of the game, and though their answers may change across the different available puzzle difficulties that one can choose at the start of the game, the message that they carry remains singular. This means that throughout multiple playthroughs the player is more likely to identify this overarching theme within these puzzles, as it is the one aspect that remains the same across different playthroughs on different difficulties.

Chapter Seven: Spaces

Space within a game is one of the most interesting areas that can be used to tell a part of the story because at least partially in most games the path to finishing the game is related to solving the puzzle of navigation; how do I exit the room that I am currently in to get to the next one? The town of Silent Hill itself is already an interesting place, but for this chapter I will be honing in on more specific locales and what they say about James' inner feelings.

The Architecture of Emotion

As James comes closer to revealing the truth about his wife's death the environments he traverses start to become less and less grounded in reality. He descends a lengthy set of stairs in the Silent Hill Historical Society which creates a distance between the places this set of stairs connects, the longer the stairs, the more disconnected these places actually seem; from the grounded reality of the misted streets of Silent Hill to the dark and twisted hallways of the labyrinth that resides underneath. The descent continues as James jumps into hole after hole, into seemingly disconnected places: flooded basements, the bottom of a well, a vertical hallway, until he finally reaches a somewhat sensible place: the prison. This sequence of events could be seen as a descent into madness, or perhaps diving into the deepest recesses of James' mind. It is only fitting to find a prison there, a place intrinsically linked with the ideas of guilt and punishment.

In one of the cell blocks of the prison James can enter a specific cell but when he attempts to escape the player is prompted with a message that states that the lock is broken, a message previously reserved for impassable doors. For a short time then it seems to the player that they are locked inside this prison cell forever, but after trying to open the door a few more times it finally gives way. This impossibility of escape from the cell can be seen as a symbolic representation of James' struggle with escaping from his own feelings of guilt, the

prison cell obviously representing these feelings. This link is made even stronger by the fact that inside the prison cell the player finds the previously mentioned "Tablet of 'The Oppressor'" an object linked to James' struggle with the feeling of guilt.

Later in the game during a particularly labyrinthine section James comes across Maria after she had supposedly died in the hospital. She sits on a bed opposite James, a set of iron bars dividing them. Frank Degler paid specific attention to this scene in his analysis of the spaces in *Silent Hill 2*, he stated that "the spatial organization of the prison visit […] is prototypical of the game's staged disintegration of binary structures: a close look reveals that it is unclear on which side of the prison bars the player (and the hero) is located" (83). The clever use of camera angles during the scene and the amount of control Maria seems to have during their conversation once again drives home the emotion of guilt; James is locked in a mental prison of his own device.

Many of the depictions in *Silent Hill 2* are thematically centred on water. Many of the dilapidated places have suffered water damage, which is represented through water puddles on the floor and large water stains on the walls and furniture. The names of the areas you visit often feature a reference to water such as Brookhaven Hospital, Rosewater Park, Blue Creek Apartments, or Lakeview Hotel. And the entirety of the town of Silent Hill is situated next to Toluca Lake, which is central to the game's geography; a fairly lengthy section of the game is even spent crossing the lake in a rowboat. Depression is often described by its sufferers to feel like you are drowning or linked to water in imagery, such as a permanent torrential rain that rains down only on the depressed person. The prevalence of symbolism relating to water can be seen as another allusion to James' depression, especially when seen in light of Doris C. Rusch's reading of town of Silent Hill as a "projection screen for the inner journey" (240).

Conclusion

In this thesis I wanted to show how *Silent Hill 2* is able to represent the complexity of the grieving process by combining narrative and game elements to more intricately represent emotions. I did this by analysing the various different formative aspects of the game, such as the overarching story, the various characters, the puzzles, objects, texts, and spaces of the game and how these elements help to express the various emotions that are part of the grieving process. I showed how in light of Doris C. Rusch's reading of *Silent Hill 2* as a psychotherapeutic process many of the predominantly ludic elements can gain a new narrative dimension once the player has become more familiar with the game's intricacies. Some puzzles or enemies gain a new symbolic meaning in relation to the overarching narrative of the game, the various areas that one visits and their mind bending spatiality become in some ways a reflection of James' inner struggles, the texts you come across in your journey through Silent Hill inform your understanding of James' emotional turmoil, the visuals of the various enemies you encounter in the game become loaded with sexual symbolism, and the other characters reflect different aspects of James' struggle with the death of his wife. It seems to me that I have made sufficiently clear how *Silent Hill 2* through using both its narrative focussed and chiefly ludic elements to represent emotions that one feels in relation to death is able to accurately show the complexity of the grieving process.

Though *Silent Hill 2* did not leave much of a mark on the videogame industry during its initial release in 2001, its cult following and lasting appeal significantly increased the game's lifespan. Though academics were enamoured with *Silent Hill 2* and the many interesting angles from which the game could be analysed, writing countless articles about its intricacies, only recently has the real impact of *Silent Hill 2* shown itself in the commercial realm of videogames. Games like *Lone Survivor* (Superflat Games, 2012) and *Distraint*

(Jesse Makkonen, 2015) attempted to emulate *Silent Hill 2*'s focus on psychological horror and its interesting way of showing complicated emotional processes. *P.T.* (Kojima Productions, 2014) a playable teaser for the newest upcoming game in the *Silent Hill* franchise showed there was an interest in returning to the roots of the game series, exploring more complicated emotional struggles through psychological horror. *Silent Hill 2*, a game that barely sold a million copies worldwide, is still a major talking point in the industry, so much so that as recently as 2017 journalists were still writing articles praising the game sixteen years after its initial release.[2] It is specifically this lasting impact of *Silent Hill 2* that made it an interesting object of study.

For my analysis I would have liked to look at more different examples of this symbolic narrative aspect in predominantly ludic elements, by comparing various games in which this seems to be happening and looking at how they differ in representation but also where they overlap. I decided to focus on a single game, however, because I feel that it is more fruitful to look at a single example first in order to clearly outline the phenomenon that I am studying prior to complicating the analysis. I would have also liked to give more attention to the theme of psychological archaeology, but I felt that this would spread my attention across too many different aspects. In order to more clearly focus my analysis around death and the emotions that are linked to death I decided not to incorporate this theme into my analysis more expansively.

For further research I hope to look for this kind of representations of emotions in more games, such as *Limbo*, *Braid*, or *Shadow of the Colossus* (Team Ico, 2005). Furthermore during my research into *Silent Hill 2* I noticed a clear theme of illumination, represented by the use of the flashlight, the various references to darkness and light, and some puzzles relating to illumination. I feel, however, that this theme is not directly related to

[2] https://www.gamesradar.com/why-silent-hill-2-so-high-our-new-top-100-because-its-perfect-game/

the representation of death within *Silent Hill 2* and more to the nature of the emotional archaeology that James is performing during his psychotherapeutic process. I would like to look into this theme more closely, but I feel it would not have been fruitful to introduce it into my thesis.

Ultimately it is the player who decides the end to James' inner journey, it seems only fitting in the context of game that his would be the case. They are however confined to a specific set of outcomes, all linked to James' various emotional reactions to his wife's death. By giving the player control of certain elements, but by cementing certain other elements of the narrative the game is able to give a complex representation of the grieving process. By contextualizing the player's actions and interactions the game supports their shift from intervention to interpretation.

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