

## **Aspects of Silent Hill**

By one of the Insane

In the late nineties - early noughties, the computer software company Konami issued a set of adventure/semi beat-em-ups called Silent Hill that were capable of different endings.

If you like shoot em-ups, you will get one game, if you like adventure, you will get another, but this game can be for both, and mostly it is for those who like to descend into madness, knowing they will be free to walk away at anytime, even if they choose not to.

The premise of the first was that you were a father called Harry Mason, travelling with his daughter, an eight year old called Cheryl. An accident involving your car makes you wake up in the town called Silent Hill.

The whole place seems deserted, with snow/ash like flakes constantly falling. Also a semi fog engulfs the place and it is hard to see too far, but you are more worried that your daughter is no longer in the car. As you struggle back to consciousness, you see what looks like Cheryl running off in the distance. You chase after her into an alleyway. As you step further into the alley, darkness falls and that's when the twisted darkness of the game really begins.

Many of the buildings around you, and shown on the map, you are unable to enter, and the game leads you to the places you must go to, to find your missing daughter and uncover the tragic events of Silent hill.

Although the game has a semi set story (endings will depend on decisions you make) it is not that which interests those that study the separate games. Instead, it is the state of the locations you find at different times and what they represent. Although the uninitiated will assume the games are just stories, they are in fact a study of the human psyche.

There are three stages in the township's degradation, which symbolise the three stages of degradation of the human mind. First there is isolation, fogginess, leading to a lack of clarity. Second there is fear, strangeness, darkness. And third there is paranoia, distortion of reality, nightmares come true.

At first, when Harry enters the town, apart from being eerily silent and empty, the locations are relatively normal. There is a café, a school, hospital and church. Later you get to see the fairground, police station, boat way, lighthouse and (in later games) various other locations that open up in the town.

Whilst walking around a building or area, either doors will lock behind you or darkness descends. This is the second stage. A more deteriorated town is apparent. There is dust, debris, a feeling that something has happened in the past, but we don't know what.

This is part of the games point. However, there are times in the normal world when you see the area seeming to darken slightly, or not be as bright as it was, is that the game or the actions you have taken? Possibly this, like many questions, could only be answered if you were in a room with three hundred people playing the game and see what actions they take and what changes in the game.

But, even in the darker, more worrying, world, there is still normalcy, as such. There is a feeling that maybe you are seeing the town as it really is, and that it has been abandoned a lot longer than you had initially thought.

However, when the siren sounds, these locations became something else. They descend from almost normalcy into nightmare visions of old, abandoned, metal shells that are filled with corpses that have been strung up and mutilated; blood smeared messages and clues are on walls or objects.

There are also, what seem to be, ghosts and murderous beings intent on stopping you from solving the clues and finding Cheryl. (Although in the, so called normal aspect of Silent Hill, there are also a few monsters to avoid; seemingly rabid monster dogs and flying creatures.)

The first live person that you meet in the town is a cop, called Sybil, who gives you a gun. The main thing she tells you is to make sure you know what you are shooting at before you shoot it. The fear of the player, at an unexpected attack, makes this harder than first imagined, and that is what sets up the kind of player you are. There are more choices to be made than first thought.

In the opening sequence of the game you have no weapon, and small creatures converge on you until you pass out and wake up in the café with Sybil the cop. In the café, before you can leave, you must kill a flying monster. Therefore, your instincts tell you to kill all the bad guys.

During the hints of the game you are told that you do not need to kill the rabid dogs or psycho nurses and doctors, but, if you injure them and leave them living, when you return to that location, they will be active again.

Again, this makes the player assume that killing them is the easiest option and the one to go for. But there is the problem. Are you supposed to kill, or are you doing what the game wants you too? Are you following the path of Silent Hill madness?

The degradation of your surroundings is often used in films and books as a form of showing the degradation of the human mind. Isolation, fear, paranoia; these are the things that affect human mental states. They can often lead an ordinary human to the point of killing if extreme enough.

In Silent Hill it is no different. There are clues to this in the games. Once you have killed outside the café, you leave bloody footprints. You have made a mark in that world. You have shed blood. But what happens

when the siren speaks and the true bad guys come out? Well, everyone you meet as a monster, you actually meet as a living person too.

For example: in the hospital, you meet (briefly) a doctor who runs out of the room. You go to follow him and cannot find him, but you do find a small broken vial of liquid. However, the locations are set so that the only way to complete that level is to go upstairs. The rooms lock behind you, the siren sounds and the nightmares come. These nightmares are in the shapes of doctors and nurses who all look alike as they stagger towards you with evil intent. But do they?

The truth is, until you actually approach them, they do not move. They are just standing, turned away from you. Once they see you, however, they will move towards you, and your fear instinct will tell you to kill them. Later, as you solve the clues, you will be rewarded by returning to the normal world and finding a nurse called Lisa, who also disappears before you can do much but have a few minutes to talk. Is she the nurse from the nightmare world, replicated into a horde of monsters?

This also happens in the school, the second major location with objectives. There are references to Gordon, a teacher. But in the first actual part of the game, the town, when the sirens came and night fell, did you kill Gordon when you saw zombie like creatures coming towards you?

Inside the school, the creatures that come for you are very strange, dwarf like things, some invisible. Are these children that your fear has turned into something worse? In the hospital are Lisa and the Doc the same as the weird zombie types that stand facing the wall until you approach?

The trouble is, unless you are very good at stealth and running away without panic and have the ability to know direction easily, killing first and asking questions later is the usual gamer's response.

The reason that the question *can* be asked, is killing right, is that later in the game, at the fairground, you meet Sybil the cop again, coming towards to in a semi zombie state. There you have a choice, use the potion you found on Sybil or kill her. If you use the potion, you save her life and she no longer tries to kill you. In fact, a strange thing attached to her spinal column falls off. But saving her has a cost. If you kill her and later use the potion, you have a very different ending. But what would happen if you used the potion on the doc zombie? Would that only work if you had killed nothing in Silent Hill? Is it possible? And if so, could he make a potion that is capable of saving all the zombies?

One of the hardest things about this game is its memory. The game records your movements as you go. Although you still rely on save points, from that first initial meeting in the alleyway, your computer is judging you, and you can never go back and change it. You have responded a certain way so the computer gives you the game you have subconsciously chosen in those first few minutes, because that was your true response.

This may seem a little harsh, but it is reality. We are driven by fear, the most primitive of emotions, the most basic, but the most life like. Very few people, when perceiving a probable threat stop to think and look around. It usually comes down to fight or flight. The computer knows this, but it also has capacity for those that don't use only these two methods.

Visually, Silent Hill is horrendous. There are people that have been crucified with their organs hanging out; strange trolleys, covered in blood stained sheets, with unidentified shapes underneath. Is this real? Or what our minds expect to find in these weird circumstances.

How would most humans respond if they were involved in an accident, found themselves isolated and needed to think not only of their own survival, but were driven by fear and parental concern for their missing child? Especially when strange nightmare visions and creatures haunted that strange land?

The true answers to the meaning of Silent Hill are to be found in the locations and symbolic content. They are all places, either from our childhood or beyond, that should never really be empty.

Schools, hospitals, fairgrounds, all take on an eerie other-world-ness when they are closed, be it for the night or because the building is no longer used. They become a place of nightmares, if only in our imaginations. A church with no priest or congregation becomes a place abandoned by God. A lighthouse with no keeper or light becomes a place that wrecks ships.

Staircases are not immune from the Silent Hill treatment either. There are many of them in the games and they have a significant impact on the player. Usually they denote the descent or ascent into another domain and don't we, as humans, regard staircases and stair wells in such a way? How many of us, as children, have dared or been dared, to climb up or down unfamiliar stairwells, such as at schools, hospitals, the swimming baths? Church towers and other forbidden places are a source of fear and excitement. We make up stories of what lies at the top or bottom of such places. The feelings are intensified when, at the point of reaching their end, we find a door that is locked or says private, no admittance. They remind us of the cellar and attic, both places of darkness, usually, and which fed our childhood fears.

As for objects, well there are many different ones in the game that represent our fears.

The symbolic images of a wheelchair on its side with a wheel spinning, where is the occupant? A forlorn toy rabbit left on a shelf, where is the child? A telephone that was dead, suddenly ringing in an empty room. A piano that was closed, now open with blood on the keys. These are all images used to provoke fear, unease, surprisingly more so than a bloody handprint. Because they promote the feelings that human's have of the right thing at the right time, in the right way. And when those things are wrong, for whatever reason, it brings about a feeling of disquiet.

The other symbol in the games is the subject of mirrors.

What do humans see in mirrors? Do they see their true self? Do they impose an image of what they want to be? Or are they objects to be feared, as they show another reality?

Different religions from all over the globe treat mirrors with respect or fear. They are covered when there is a death in the family or house, or if there is a thunderstorm. They are considered unlucky if broken, or used as parts of rituals in witchcraft, be it good or bad. (i.e. you may see the shadow of your future spouse, or to invade the privacy of your enemy.)

Mirrors in Silent Hill are very strange things. They are either broken, impossible to see into, or they reflect things that are not really there in the physical world, only in the nightmare world. But they still have the power to create madness or distort the truth.

Sound is also an important part of Silent Hill. Not only the sound of the siren, which brings dread, but the other constant sound of what reminds us of something hitting metal, slowly, repeatedly. Whispering voices and slamming doors in the distance, the tolling of a bell. Moans and groans as the supposed monsters come towards us; the sound of Cheryl in fear begging us to save her, or the sound of sobbing in an empty room, and even those moments in the game where there is no sound, becomes as important for its absence.

Humans also have a great fear of madness, and of madness somehow being transferred from the sick to the healthy, when the reality is it is circumstance that affects us. As stated, losing a child, finding yourself in an unknown place, or being totally alone are things that give so called 'normal people' nightmares. Horror we can fight or run from, normality gone awry makes us stop in fear, trepidation. Should we go down that dark alley? Should we open that door that is locked? Should we answer that phone that is ringing even though it is not ours?

When the siren sounds in Silent Hill and the nightmare world returns, we are sickened by the sticky floors, the walls that are stained and mouldy. We move away from them, again, as if fearing they will somehow contaminate us. We stick to the centre of the walkway. We know we must examine what lies under the bloody sheet on the trolley, but our heart pounds as we do so, resisting the urge to run away.

Although Silent Hill is a town, really it is just an amalgamation of all the places and things that we fear. There are elements of cults that murdered for their gods; empty prisons with one prisoner still there, forgotten; mental institutes where strange and terrible treatment were carried out; schools with hidden rooms where children were subjected to forms of abuse; hospitals that tied patients to beds and left them to die.

Are these just urban legends? No, we know from history and news reports that these things have happened in the past and will happen again.

It is a place where we can face all those fears and come through. We can be scared for an hour or two a day because it is only a game. But even the game can affect our mental state.

At one point, you bump into Lisa for about the fourth or fifth time. She tells you there is no hope, that something is wrong with her. Then she puts out her arms to you whilst she is crying tears of blood and staggering towards you. Whatever your own human response is, Harry in the game runs from the room. Would any of that really happen? Yes. Our fear of some disease that makes you cry blood would repulse us, fill us with dread. We are not, for the most part, trained to deal with that. And those that are still have that initial moment in their training that wants to react with horror and shun the diseased person.

However, once you have faced it, or even if you are the type of person who is not affected by it, trying to solve problems like that, (the un-winnable) can drive you to tears, anger or even rage as you try and retry to save the un-saveable. Even games that are not made to frighten, but instil and promote a violent gratification, or solve tiny puzzles, can cause this response.

That is why we play, to push ourselves, to push our knowledge and to face those things which frighten us, often using our anger to do so.

This is also true of the way you kill and what you kill in Silent Hill.

Although in the first part you are given a gun, there are other weapons to pick up during the game. One of them is a blood stained axe. If you choose to kill the monsters with the gun, the kill is generally a clean, impersonal one. The axe, on the other hand, is a more gory and violent death. And for the nurses, it includes knocking them down and kicking them to death in a semi sexual sadistic way. Also, in a later episode, on returning to the carousel, you find a message scrawled in blood, instructing to you to kill a particular horse on the carousel. This seemingly alive horse screams in agony as you do so. This can make you shy away from the objective or satisfy blood thirsty sadism, depending on the type of player, or person, you are.

Is it right to play a game that encourages this sort of violence? Well the game does not encourage it, only the gamer can make those decisions, and often only by trying them. There is always an off button, and though we might often wish we didn't have to do these things, we still find ourselves doing them. We push ourselves on even when we are sickened by our own actions.

We play games to win. Therefore, if the game grips us enough, we will revisit the same scenarios over and over to get past that point. It becomes an all consuming passion. In Silent Hill, this is almost constant.

There are (in later games) companions that wander around with you; their safety is your concern. In the second episode, you and a companion are confronted by a knife wielding maniac. Your first impulse is to run down the long corridor. You do so, slam through the door and find your

companion missing. You do the same thing again, but this time you stand between the maniac and your companion so that you can prevent her from being killed or taken. Slowly you walk backwards until you reach the door. She is by your side constantly. She is safe. You walk through the door and she is gone.

This happens occasionally in the game, you think you know the object to the scenario to find out you were wrong, or that you were right, but you won't find out till the end or much later in the game. This is frustrating, but it is meant to be. Silent Hill cannot give easy options because it is a game designed in and for insanity. Everything you do, everyone you meet, every objective you have, is tinged or enclosed in madness; but it is also about reality and our perception of it.

There will always be things we can't change in life, things that we can not know until a later stage. To some extent, you can reload and try again from the beginning, but somehow part of you knows that the ending you had is the ending for you, be it failure or success. You made the choices you made, because of the person you are.

In the third episode you are Cheryl as a teenager.

You are in a shopping centre at the start. There is a man that knows your name and, for some reason, he creeps you out. In escaping him you crawl through a window and come out in an alley that leads at another part of the shopping centre. Again the theme is played of a place that should be full of people and loud with noise being empty and silent.

This is not a remake of the first, but it does have a story that entwines it more to the first and revisits, although more grandly, some of the areas from the first, such as the fairground. But also there is the intro to the train stations. (Anyone who has been in a tube or train station at night knows how frightening these are.) There is an underlying story of finding out who you are and why you are.

It is interesting to note that there are packages of meat that you can place down for the mad dogs, so that instead of attacking you, they go straight for the food and you can get past them without killing.

There is also a man that you talk to on several occasions. At one point he asks, or states, the fact that you see the creatures as monsters, he seems surprised by the fact.

Are they monsters? Or is that what you see, in your fear? Each time you face this question yourself, as the player, it seems more and more uncertain, but, as each game insists you kill at least one creature, unable to continue unless you do, what choice is there? How can you refuse to kill if the game makes you? Perhaps, as Sybil suggested, making sure you know what you're killing before you do it, is the only answer.

In the fourth episode (considered the most difficult) the madness of the individuals rather than the public bodies of the town are explored.

The player wakes up in an apartment, a noise from the other room means you can either rush out to see what it was or stop and explore first. If you rush from the bedroom, you cannot return to it in its original state. Again showing us what kind of a person we are. Do we find out what that noise was? Is someone in distress? Or do we ignore it and check out our surroundings first?

After a cursory glance at the rest of the place, you notice several things. You cannot get out of the apartment, you have a neighbour who can't hear you shouting and there are pictures on the wall that have some memories. Unfortunately, then all goes blank and you wake up back in the bedroom.

This time when you leave the room, you find that there are chains on the door preventing it from being opened. The chains are on the inside. Things are a little different; more dirty, and, once the game commands it, there is a hole in the bathroom wall which you can crawl through to part of the outside world. However, when you return, there are changes in the room around you. You must look around, note these changes, then, when prompted, crawl through the even bigger hole in the bathroom wall.

The first time you crawl through, you meet a person, Cynthia, you talk, walk a ways, and she goes into the ladies room. A few moments later, you see rabid dogs come out and start chewing on something on the floor. You can edge past these creatures without killing them as they are blind to anything but food.

Again, there is the wonder, if we don't kill, can we change things? Is it the killing that we commit what determines the outcome of those we later meet? This is, as stated, a much harder game to play, but is that because those that have played instantly try to kill anything that comes towards them? Especially if they attack.

You go into the ladies to find out what happened to Cynthia and find a hole, which leads you back to your apartments, which has gone through yet more changes.

Out of all the sequels, this one more than most returns to the theme of isolation. Although you do meet companions, the apartment is yours alone. Also you get to spy on a neighbour, through peepholes. This is something that touches the edge of voyeurism, and shows us how we feel about it. Do we watch because we have to, or are we fascinated by it?

There is also opportunity (and need) to look outside our windows and see a real, bustling, town; the Silent Hill that we never got to see in the first three games. We are never a part of that town, but to see it makes the isolation in the apartment seem even more sad.

As with the third we get to revisit train station scenarios, but this deals more with the element of supernatural. There are recorded ghosts in this place and we get to find out their stories, and what they have to do with the person at the apartment block.

However, this also deals with multi personalities, and if you pay attention to the things in the room, even those that seem unchanged, you realise that

this game, although looking at the world through your eyes, the eyes are from different people.

The main locations are the train stations, the hospital, the apartment block and the hotel, but they are slightly different, although there is also a feeling of familiarity that is welcome. There is also a graveyard that has no names on the head stones, only numbers. These numbers are later found on the 'living' people we have met.

This episode, as with aspects of all four, deals with suicide. There is no reason it should not, as madness often descends into a point of no return, and the only way to escape a living nightmare is to end it all. But the ghosts are often trying to tell us something. Was it suicide in all cases? Were there outside forces that made life such a nightmare to begin with?

This is not one story, this is several and piecing them together, as well as dealing with a multi haunted apartment takes the game into a higher difficulty level. For you must not only solve the puzzles, but also stop the things that begin to appear in your apartment, as they trying to drain all your energy.

Although this episode does have the trademark sounds and grime, it stands alone in stating out loud that this is insanity at its most human. This is not things we fear, this is not separate from reality, it *is* reality, every day. This is no ghost town, but a town with ghosts and the living existing side by side. This relates to the everyday insanity that many live with, and what problems they face in seeking help.

Although, visually, it is not much darker than the others (if at all), in atmosphere, the closeness to reality makes it less scary on a monster level, but more twisted on a personal level. We know we are the person that locked himself in, chained the door, and shunned our neighbours. We are the strange man that lives down the hall. We are the voyeur who watches our neighbours across the street. But instead of waking up in the nightmare world, we are watching ourselves slowly descend into it, with little hope for escape.

There is also more story on the sanctuary, a place where children were taken. An explanation more fully of the cult that seemed to plague Silent Hill.

The film that was made of Silent Hill does not explore the fourth episode but rather tries to amalgamate the first three and concentrate on the cult. It leaves out the main stories in the forth part and only concerns the parts that contain Silent Hill the town.

For those who have never played the games, or who were only interested in the monster side of things, this is not a bad film. It tells the story of the cult which was the downfall of the town. Also it tells the story of Alessa, the person who is responsible for most of your objectives and why Cheryl is so important (though they changed her name and the gender of Harry.) It does not dwell on individual madness, but that of a town sucked in by

strong willed people and religion. It misses out so much on the insanity we create through our own actions.

It would have been much better to have made four films, for they do interconnect yet have their own unique tales. It would have been possible to show the full symbol-logy of the things and places we fear; and the consequences of our actions when we are thrown into that world. Instead we are shown the police and husband in the outside world, which totally ruins the whole aspect of isolation in those games.

They also missed out the symbols that are recurrent through the games, those which haunt the most, the wheelchair, the rabbit and the mirrors. These are important elements that should have been reiterated as they were in the games.

There is not much more to say on this subject, except that in playing these games, we learn more about ourselves, and those around us, than probably we would want to, but they are worth playing.

Insanity is a part of all our lives. It might be a family member, the crazy lady down the hall, that mad cult that our kids joined, but we must remember the outside forces that can cause it - isolation, fear and paranoia. They are in all of us, and all around us. We must fight them, not completely, for in part we need them to survive, but enough to stop us destroying our own worlds.

And if you have played the games, and would like to visit that world, even just a little, check out the films Session 9, Mirrors and Death Tunnel. There is something about them that makes you go 'ahhh, I'm home.'

**JULIE PETO 2010**  
**SITTING ALONE (FREQUENTLY)**  
**UNAFRAID (USUALLY)**  
**NOT PARANOID (MOSTLY)**

