You should put your headphones on when playing it, everyone said. I did. I always do. It really doesn’t matter what the game is. But it was *Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice*, a narrative that has everything to do with your head and armed with a headgear, you can better gain entry into this experience of feeling unarmed.

I played a good portion of my walkthrough when Y was having a depressive episode. She was either caged in silence, or she would bang herself against the bars with a passionate effusion of words. And then she would doze off. You have this unwavering faith in the horizontal when you are depressed. You feel the urge to lie down on every surface and it feels like an unobtrusive, cool embrace. Y was mostly sleeping, and yet, the anxiety left her in need of constant company. So as I sat at my computer playing, she would usually lie down on the bed behind me. I hated it. I get uncomfortable when people watch me playing. It is like stepping into another world with one foot left behind. But floating between that particular world and this particular person at that particular state, the problem assumed a modified aspect.

The game’s narrative is built on the familiar myth of a journey into the underworld, here a Celtic insular one where our protagonist, seeming to suffer from a curse herself, seeks to redeem the soul of her dead lover. Also, the whole quest is a well-developed metaphor for the struggles of a psychotic mind. If you find the age-old motif trite and so prefer to see ‘but’ instead of ‘also’ opening the above sentence, don’t look at me for sympathy. I’m all for overtones, ironies, and twists. BUT, I don’t believe a text can’t be interesting or relevant unless it somehow alludes to something currently and widely “worthy” of discussion. Even worse, I can’t help thinking that such attempts could actually reduce the subjects of those discussions to “trends”. On a less high-flown, more probable note, I am reaching the age where clichés start to grow on you. Still, a metaphor is a beautiful thing, really. All myth is fundamentally metaphorical, anyway. And *Hellblade’s* metaphor doesn’t seem forced. It is actually a gorgeous ode to ambiguity. It also has an enlightening agenda, of course, which it certainly flaunts through its opening “warning”.
Y was not into gaming, but she was a visual artist of great taste with a strong penchant for narrative illustration. The first time she saw me walking around as Senua, she got curious, and I very much wanted to share with her the joy and dread of those deliciously bitter aesthetics. I was also anxious about her being exposed to such content. ‘Provoking’ was the adjective that came to mind.

I could be just overthinking, of course. She could even find it therapeutic. Senua is battling demons not unlike the monsters you slay as The Witcher’s Geralt (Valravn can find home with both Hybrids and Relics like Griffins or Leshens, in my opinion, and Garm would easily sit in the Relic category alongside couching monsters like Fiends and Howlers), but her struggle is more about her constant pains and fears than intermittent combats or puzzles. It is a matter of enduring rather than overcoming. Her journey, it is true, can be read both as the fantastic quest of the hero or the inner struggles of a troubled mind. We remain undecided, as does she. But either way, this tearing uncertainty and the consequent anxiety seem so real, so vital and inevitable, that you almost never feel the need to contextualize.
Monsters will be monsters.

I briefed Y on the ambiguity of the plot and turned on the speakers so she could hear the voices Senua and I were hearing. And I went on playing, with a curious sense of simultaneous unease and joy. I wondered if she found it cathartic or gratuitously disturbing to watch, and looked over my shoulder, once or twice, to see her reactions. She seemed engaged, but beyond that, I had no idea how she felt.
At a climactic stage where Senua fights her way through the – literal and metaphorical – hell her mother has been through, I felt alarmed by the colorful gore, the claustrophobic path lined with crawling burnt corpses, and the feast of wailing sounds, led by the agonized face and voice of the mother who had stood for guidance and encouragement up to that point. It was definitely too much for an already restless mood. I paused the game and wrinkled my nose in mock grimace, then I turned back to meet a disgusted look on Y’s face.

She was, well, fast sleep.

The fearful throbbing of my heart in that moment slowed down a bit, then turned into an ambiguous rhythm of confusion, then again gained a speed-up of surprise, and finally bled into a muted laughter. This was the moment I began – and only began – to understand the importance of understanding the impossibility of understanding pain. And yes! I found it difficult to deal with the painful pleasure of giving in to incomprehension, to leave things undiagnosed. It is not even a perplexity in the face of something mysterious or impossibly complex, although the workings of human mind AND body is both those things. But pain itself is a curse, or a blessing, if you will, which means it flies on the borders of the territory of signification, like the empty forms Senua must align with objects to make her way through.

Can’t apprehend it, can’t comprehend it.

When I look back at the walkthrough, I find that the most intense moments are the quietest ones. I remember, for instance, the long, terribly lonely walk on the cold beach, guided by the sporadic appearance of a light in the form of Dillion’s figure before Senua finds the sword and goes through Odin’s trials to claim it. There you have it: be it a dark rot spreading up your arm, mental illness, grief, or a blow dealt by a monster, pain is difficult, almost impossible, to pinpoint. You think you have identified the wound, the piece that is missing, but it flickers before your eyes, disappears, and reappears in other forms again and again. In my mother tongue, the word for pain is درد: a palindrome, a never-ending journey, an infinite circle that refuses itself the relaxation of a point of perfect determinacy. You feel an itch, see a door left ajar, hear a musical note. Infinite side quests beckon every step of the way.
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