

Silent Hill: Biography of a Place

written by Byron Alexander Campbell | August 21, 2014



At first, I thought I was losing my mind. But now I know I'm not. It's not me. This whole town...it's being invaded by the Otherworld. A world of someone's nightmarish delusions come to life.

In Adrian Lyne's masterful psychological horror film *Jacob's Ladder*, screenwriter Bruce Joel Rubin wrote, paraphrasing German theologian/philosopher Meister Eckhart:

The only thing that burns in Hell is the part of you that won't let go of life, your memories, your attachments. They burn them all away. But they're not punishing you, he said. They're freeing your soul. So, if you're frightened of dying and... and you're holding on, you'll see devils tearing your life away. But if you've made your peace, then the devils are really angels, freeing you from the earth.

Hell (or more rightly, Purgatory), then, is not a place; it is a process. It is purgatory, in the sense of purgation or cleansing, but it isn't punishment for having led a wicked life; rather, it is a confrontation and resolution of the soul's feelings of guilt, the smoothing over of psychological scars. In many ways, these memories that must be burned away, whether they are caused by shame or pain, are traumas of the soul. It's no surprise that Konami's Silent Hill series of horror video games makes overt reference to Lyne's 1990 film in several sequences, notably in the third game (in fact, the series has been hugely influential in broadening my cultural horizons; it led me to discover, among other things, *Jacob's Ladder*, *Session 9*, the novel *House of Leaves* and the works of David Lynch). From the very first release, Silent Hill has been concerned about one thing and one thing only: the exploration and resolution of trauma. Whether it's a physically and mentally abused child, a shell-shocked war veteran (another *Jacob's Ladder* homage), a man processing the death of his beloved wife, or a serial killer with mommy issues that make Norman Bates appear normal, these works demonstrate video games' unique ability to convey a psychologically complex narrative almost entirely through concrete details. By the process of transference, the town of Silent Hill undergoes a literal transformation, its walls and structures conforming to the psychological cartography of the perceiver, while the protagonist's or antagonist's inner demons manifest as horrific monsters stalking the otherwise deserted city streets. I started writing about Silent Hill for Entropy some time ago, but it wasn't until Konami's announcement of *Silent Hills*, a new addition to the series co-created by game designer Hideo Kojima and filmmaker Guillermo Del

Toro—a dream team if I ever saw one—that I found the motivation to reconfront a series that was integral to my own understanding of what video games can do. Over a series of articles, I plan to work through the series and its expanded universe, including the first feature film and the separate-but-related *Siren*. This is the first of such efforts, dedicated to the series' debut title, *Silent Hill*.



In 1999, when *Silent Hill* was released on Sony's original PlayStation console, there was nothing else quite like it. Sure, there had been *Resident Evil* and, by that point, *Resident Evil 2*. Drawing from earlier horror titles like *Alone in the Dark* and *Clock Tower*, *Resident Evil* gave a name to the emerging genre of survival horror, popularizing and cementing its tropes: ammo conservation, limited inventory, lock/key puzzles and schizophrenic architecture in which, say, the process of unlocking a drawer could involve inserting 6 gemstones into the eyes of marble busts, then rotating them in accordance with a riddle carved into the bookcase. Characters in survival horror games are not action heroes; they are ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances. The polar opposite of Mario chain-squashing goombas to cross a pit of spikes, each enemy in a survival horror game provokes a complex, sometimes agonizing decision: whether to waste a bullet putting it down, go in close and risk taking damage, or avoid it and hope you won't need to pass through the same hallway again. (Another key element of survival horror games is extensive backtracking, one of the reasons behind the pervasiveness of lock/key puzzles in the genre.)

However, where *Resident Evil* was a loving homage to George Romero and B-horror (consult the live-action opening sequence, above), and *Clock Tower* to Dario Argento and the slasher genre, *Silent Hill* drew overtly from more literary sources. Set in an eponymous former resort town somewhere in New England, *Silent Hill* provides a literal roadmap to its inspirations in the names of its very streets, each an homage to a notable genre author: Matheson, Levin, Ellroy, Bachman, Bloch, King. The town's elementary school was named for *The Midwich Cuckoos*, the novel that inspired *Village of the Damned*. Later games in the series would feature overt references to David Lynch (*Silent Hill 2*) and psychological horror films such as *Jacob's Ladder* and *Session 9* (*Silent Hill 3*).

The original *Silent Hill*, meanwhile, pays homage primarily to the extensive oeuvre of Stephen King, most notably *Carrie* and *The Mist*. (The latter is, for my money, the only must-read story in King's bloated bibliography.) Like many games of the time, it begins before it begins, with a CGI sequence shown only if you idle at the start menu—father Harry Mason and daughter Cheryl are driving along a winding mountain highway at night; a ghostly figure dressed in a school uniform appears in the middle of the road; Harry swerves to avoid her and ends up running his car off of the road. He comes to, in the game proper, remarkably intact but Cheryl-less inside his wrecked vehicle. The town outside—*Silent Hill*—is drenched in a thick fog and touched by unseasonal snowfall. Harry spots Cheryl in the distance, and a short cat-and-mouse game ensues, with the seven-year-old girl leading Harry deeper into an

increasingly disturbing network of suburban alleys. An air raid siren calls; the sky dims; the pale concrete walls turn to rusted barbed wire and chain link. Harry eventually comes upon a dead end, with Cheryl nowhere to be seen, and is soon ambushed by freakish child-sized, knife-wielding monsters. The player can attempt to fight or run, but this confrontation is designed to be unwinnable. Harry dies....

And awakens, unmarked, inside a roadside diner. This is the player's introduction to *Silent Hill*, a tenebrous cycle of death and dreams, a quiet town blotted out by pure white fog one minute and all-consuming darkness the next—seesawing between grave-like stillness and industrial nightmare, a transition heralded by the siren's call.

Many inexplicable things occur in the town of Silent Hill, and on several occasions, Harry wonders if he's losing his mind. A few clues to the truth are scattered here and there in in-game documents or puzzles, but unlike the relatively straightforward Hollywood adaptation, the explanations the game provides are often at odds with one another. One non-canonical ending, which has since become a series staple, even chalks Harry's experience up to alien experimentation. Like a good David Lynch film, *Silent Hill* provides room for the player to make her own meaning out of the hallucinatory events that unfold.

Two of these theories are worthy of deeper consideration. First, we have the "mass hallucination" theory. A major sub-plot of the game, revealed through conversations between Harry and the few other human residents he meets, references a drug-trafficking ring operating out of Silent Hill. The drug, called PTV, is manufactured from the seeds of an indigenous plant, White Claudia. An in-game document describes the plant:

Perennial herb found near water. Reaches height of 10 to 15 inches. Oblong leaves, white blossoms. Seeds contain hallucinogen. Ancient records show it was used for religious ceremonies. The hallucinogenic effect was key.

The question, then, becomes: could the hallucinogenic effect of the seeds be strong enough to affect people if aerated, for example, by the thick fog rising off of Toluca Lake? This theory recalls Stephen King's novella *The Mist*, an obvious source of inspiration for the game. In the novella, King is similarly lax in providing a definitive conclusion for the cause of the pervasive, monster-inhabited mist that envelops the town of Bridgton following a severe thunderstorm, although he provides plenty of potential theories. Several of these theories involve chemical or nuclear waste present in Highland Lake—the source of the mist—being somehow stirred up by the thunderstorm. Could something similar have occurred in Silent Hill?

A more popular theory—and certainly more supported by the game's official ending—is that the nightmares inhabiting Silent Hill are all a projection, or poltergeist, of one girl's psychic anguish (the *Carrie* connection is apparent

here). Alessa Gillespie, the teenaged girl whose apparition Harry swerved to avoid, was abused both mentally and physically for her entire life. She was raised by Dahlia Gillespie, a prominent figure in Silent Hill's local religion, a secretive but influential cult that continues the pagan (some might say demonic) traditions of the region's indigenous peoples. At seven years old, as part of a ritual to incubate an incarnation of the cult's god within her womb, Alessa was burned alive; she survived the fire, but lay comatose for seven more years until Harry and Cheryl arrived in the town. Cheryl is in fact Alessa's other half, a part of herself that she manifested as an infant (later discovered by Harry and his wife) in order to prevent the god's birth. Already blessed with psychic gifts, Alessa has become even more powerful due to the evil presence within her and the changes brought by adolescence. When Cheryl is within her proximity, Alessa's powers are strong enough for her physical and mental torture to physically alter the structure of the town itself.

In this way, the preference for psychological horror over schlock and gore extends beyond mere plot; every element in *Silent Hill*, from the architecture to the puzzles, monsters and music, is carefully designed to reveal an element of this character's psyche. The same design philosophy extends to the other games in the series; their stories are intensely personal explorations of guilt, loss, shame and damnation, and the buildings, enemies and tone of each game are rebuilt to reflect its protagonist. This is huge. Setting is something that video games have always been good at—it is almost always the player's central focus. Characters, especially in the days before subtle facial animation, not so much. *Silent Hill's* innovation to merge the two—to develop the character *through* the environment—was groundbreaking, and establishes the entire series as exemplary specimens of video game storytelling technique.

Later games in the series refined this process, but *Silent Hill* still offers a few good examples. Some of the game's enemies, such as the pterodactyl-like "Air Screamer," appear a bit silly at first—until you get to Alessa's bedroom and find, on her bookshelf, a copy of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *Lost World*. The knife-wielding, child-sized monsters Harry encounters in the opening sequence and at Midwich Elementary School, with their mocking, laughter-like calls, are an easy match for Alessa's schoolmates, who we are told tormented her, calling her a witch. The powerful ape-like creatures found on Silent Hill's streets might represent Alessa's fear of physical abuse from adult figures. It's not hard to pinpoint a source for the hospital beds and wheelchairs that appear in unlikely places across Silent Hill.

The puzzle design, too, exhibits a child's influence: an early puzzle sees Harry collecting three keys, the Key of Lion, Key of Woodsman and Key of Scarecrow; while a late-game puzzle has Harry collecting and placing four plates, called the Plate of Turtle, Plate of Hatter, Plate of Cat and Plate of Queen. The major locations Harry visits throughout the game—the elementary school, the hospital, the amusement park, and the sewers—are all tied to Alessa, the latter possibly representing the most painful traumas buried in her unconscious. And the entirety of the game's quest—a father's tireless, brave search for his daughter—could be intended to satisfy Alessa's

unconscious desire for a father/white knight, seeing as she was raised entirely by her abusive mother.

The physical immediacy of abuse sets Alessa's mental landscape apart from that of other protagonists in the series. It is not really surprising, then, that *Silent Hill* is a more dangerous game than its successors. While the flashlight has been a longstanding trope of the series, *Silent Hill*'s darkness is more pervasive, and the creatures that lurk within it are deadlier. Ammunition is more scarce, melee weapons less reliable, health replenishment items a rarer commodity. This increased danger is most evident in the sewer sequence. Another series staple, the radio, plays a staticky noise to warn Harry of nearby monsters, but this effect is not active in the subterranean sewers. In combination with this handicap, the area introduces gremlin-like creatures that hang off of the ceiling pipes, well out of sight, waiting to drop on the unsuspecting player. With these dangers—and particularly as, according to some players, the sewer monsters' garbled hiss seems to form the words "Let go of me"—it's not hard to see the sewer as a representation of the traumatized child's unconscious. This is particularly applicable to the player's second, brief trip through the sewers immediately prior to the game's revelatory climactic sequence.

Silent Hill set a new standard for video game storytelling, and is still one of the most impressive games released for the original PlayStation, both in terms of technical execution and artistic design. I came to the game about seven years too late, after playing *Silent Hill 2* and *Silent Hill 3*, and while it didn't match the achievements of those latter titles, it still impressed me with its smartly designed, disorienting environments and everpresent sense of danger. It's dated enough that I wouldn't necessarily recommend it as the ideal entry point into the series, but it is certainly worth playing today for anybody who is interested in video game storytelling technique—as long as you can withstand its terrors. Like many other PS1 titles, *Silent Hill* is currently available as a digital download for many Sony-produced platforms, including the PlayStation 3 and PlayStation Vita.