

Introduction

The way is the goal.
—*Theravada Buddhist proverb*

The typical starting point for any discussion about *Silent Hill* is a comparison to *Resident Evil*. Given that Capcom's big hit console series (1996) was introduced before Konami's *Silent Hill* (1999), it was and still is the obligatory reference. However, as the *Official U.S. PlayStation Magazine* stated on the cover of its issue of March 1999, *SH1*¹ was "more than just a Resident Evil Clone" (quoted in Davison 2001, 130). At the time, the technical and aesthetic progress was the first thing noticed. The 2-D prerendered realistic backgrounds of Raccoon City were replaced by *Silent Hill*'s real-time 3-D environments. In addition, the fixed camera angles began to move in a dynamic fashion. Although both titles aspired to create a cinematic horror experience, the references were not the same. *Resident Evil* has always been compared to *Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968) and *Silent Hill* to *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973). This comparison also enabled the differentiation of the overarching scenario of each series: in one, members of Special Tactics and Rescue Service are progressively uncovering the evil doings of "the Umbrella Corporation" and battling a cadre of flesh-eating zombies and biotech monstrosities; in the other, ordinary individuals² are caught up in the evil plan of a religious cult known as "The Order" and have to battle monsters and other humanoid creatures that spring forth from the supernatural power of tortured minds. These narrative frameworks eventually gave birth to two different games. *Resident Evil* is more

action-oriented, focusing on quick thrill jumps, scares, and gory images, while *Silent Hill* is devised to be more psychological in nature, more about character and atmosphere, intending to convey a tone of dread, anxiety, and helplessness.

Since playing games can become a passion, discussing *Silent Hill* with specific reference to *Resident Evil* (or vice versa) often leads to inflamed debate. Various fan sites and discussion forums are the theater of such clashes. Reviewers also frequently refer to one game or another to express their opinions. For example, Michael Riser's web review of *SH3* (2003):

Stretching aesthetically beyond the confines of the genre, the first two *Silent Hill* games occasionally felt more about experience and reflection than actual gameplay, but they have enjoyed a large cult following since their inception. Whilst I loathe making this completely inevitable comparison, there are still many who continue to hold *Resident Evil*'s zombie-blasting mediocrity in higher regard simply because the gameplay can feel a touch more focused. These are the same people who don't really understand what the *Silent Hill* games are all about, either because they don't try very hard, don't want to, or simply don't (personal taste plays a part in all things, no less here than anywhere). This isn't to make fans of the series sound like elitists, for all the *Silent Hill* games have had their share of flaws, but this is more to show that it takes a certain kind of person to enjoy a trip to the Hill. No matter how much the games are praised or chastened, there will always be those who hate or love them for various and completely valid reasons. But if you're one who's willing (and brave enough) to spend some time in thought about the series' demented subject matter, you may find yourself wallowing in a deeper experience than you bargained for.

These remarks illustrate an ongoing polemical mode of inquiry that I will forego. I will however, use a portion of Riser's comments as my point of departure. The extraordinary power of *Silent Hill*, as many reviewers have noted, lies in the fact that the series isn't simply a game but rather a uniquely powerful emotional experience.³ In the *Making of SH2* (Beuglet 2001), the subtitle *Alchemists of Emotion* really is an appropriate title, referring as it does to the now famous "Team Silent," the development team responsible for the first four games of the series.⁴ It is for this dimension that millions of copies of the *Silent Hill* series have been sold to date. Therefore, although I'll be discussing *SH: Origins* (2007), *SH: Homecoming* (2008),

and *SH: Shattered Memories* (2009), as well as talking about *SH4: The Room* (2004) in the conclusion—and explaining why I do it at this late point, this book will deal primarily with the emotions inherent in *SH1*, *SH2* (2001), and *SH3*, the three games that set the core game mechanics that make the series what it is. I will not focus on the induced stress common to all video games, but instead investigate the specific fears survival horror games are designed to provoke.

An Experiential Route of Fear

My recollection of the beginning of *SH2*⁵ is exceedingly clear.⁶ I've never been as terrified as the moment I walked down the dark corridor (the brightness level set at 3 as usual) on the second floor of the Wood Side Apartments and began to hear the radio make its static noise. It was “too dark to read the map” (the in-game answer to my command). I had to kill the roaring monster that walked toward James—the player character, after which I ran under a neon light in order to further ponder my exploration. Grazing the walls and pressing my search button, I ended up in a dark room (Room 208) wondering how I was supposed to proceed in this condition. I had a few other interrogations and passed another panicked interlude in front of a second monster before I finally got to Room 205, where I found Mary's dress with the flashlight.⁷ This was such a great relief.

We can all agree that there is a big difference between the search I've just described and its alternative, where, for example, we know the flashlight is in Room 205 (and we know that at one point we will find this flashlight from our previous playing of *SH1* and from the manual). This investigative process within the game is not unlike the approaches that one can choose when studying a narrative work: to consider the work as it was experienced in the course of its first reading/viewing (an online perception) or to analyze its overall structure afterward outside of its time flow (a leisurely analysis).⁸ Those approaches are informed by cognitive film theory, which I will draw upon in my analysis. Torben Grodal has introduced two metaphors that perfectly elucidate this difference in video gameplay. In order to sum up the two poles in the game experience, poles that demarcate the experience of a newcomer⁹ from one who has mastered a game, versus gameplay experienced primarily either as mimesis or as art (or as a program we might add), Grodal differentiates the “game as an experiential route” and the “game as a map and as a system” (2003, 144).

It is certainly beneficial to know our way around, and it would be difficult to write about games while making only vague comments about the action and the places where it transpires. Despite this, it is not my intent to particularize the “map” or virtual environments of *Silent Hill* and to localize every feature. Nor is my intention to trace the path(s) as in a walkthrough. As we know, each game has different endings¹⁰ that depend on what one does and which items one acquires within the game. For instance, the Konami official website indicated that the first four endings of *SH1* depend on a combination of two conditions, which are whether or not you could see Kaufmann at the motel office, and your ability to save Cybil. Therefore, if you did not get the red liquid on the floor of the Director’s office of the Alchemilla Hospital, you will not be able to save Cybil at the merry-go-round. In order to save her, you’ll have to replay the game or, obviously, start again midway at the hospital’s reception, and so on. Yet, as linear in their structure as the games are, the endings lack finality; they are only provisional.¹¹ The first three *Silent Hill* games have been described at the time of their release as the “scariest game ever made.”¹² This essential affective project—to scare the gamer—is inherent in the experiential route of the gamer in the course of the game(s): it is a lonely psychological journey that drags the gamer into a wealth of nightmarish scenarios.

It is also not my ambition to study the “system” or the programming specifics of the games. In any case, I would be incapable of doing so because, as a gamer, I do not have access to this type of information. My approach remains gamer- or gameplay-centric. The *Silent Hill 3 Official Strategy Guide* (Birlew 2004) does, however, disclose a part of the math behind the game.¹³ The user learns the number of points associated with the monsters’ overall strength and with the damaging power of Heather’s various weapons. For example, the Insane Cancers, huge and fat humanoid creatures, have 2100–2500 physical strength points in normal action level (2520–3000 on hard level). Knowing that the attack power of one handgun bullet is 100 points, one may calculate that it will take more than 20 bullets to kill those monsters. Furthermore, one of their two-hand downward swings has 15 attack power points (a power that will increase throughout the game). Since Heather has 100 physical strength points in normal and hard action level, an Insane Cancer could kill her with 7 swings. Writing for a strategy guide, Birlew suggests the gamer “use this information to make wise decisions regarding when to fight and when to run. Just as each monster has a number representing physical strength, so does Heather. Although this

point system is hidden in the game, you can use it to your advantage if you are aware of it” (2004, 8). What’s more, the user discovers that *SH3* has a hidden supply balancing system.¹⁴ To maintain the challenge throughout the game, the system counts the ammunition and the number of health items held so as to place or remove certain supplies. Birlew gives the conditional items labels and recommends they be used “to determine why you did or did not find certain conditional supplies while playing through a stage” (2004, 47). For example, the gamer must enter the Hazel Street Station with less than 50 ammunition points, each handgun bullet being worth one point. Once more, Birlew advises the gamer:

Sometimes it is in your best interests to waste one or two extra rounds or gulp down an extra Health Drink before proceeding to the next stage. For instance, if you leave the Happy Burger with only 54 bullets, it would be wiser to pop off five rounds and enter the Hazel Station with only 49 bullets. The two extra boxes of ammunition that appear on the trashcan near the bathrooms total 20 rounds. Basically, you are trading up. Make the same decision with your recovery items before entering each new stage. Remember that ammunition loaded in the gun counts as well. (2004, 74)

With this kind of knowledge, it is certainly possible to progress through the game more easily. Nevertheless, even though game playing is all about a discrete set of choices, literally calculating all of the moves (as in the upgrade system of a role-playing game) does not elicit the same experience as making a decision based solely on observations or impressions confined to the games. Confronted with a virtual 3-D world as realistic as that of *SH3*, one’s initial inclination is to apply real-world thinking. Likewise, encountering terrifying monsters, one’s first reaction is not to view them as an algorithm of physical strength points. Those sorts of calculations are secondary (and might be taken into consideration after many attempts to beat a boss).

Who Is Walking (and Running) into *Silent Hill*?

I contend that the design of *Silent Hill*, in contrast to Riser’s previous comment about the not rightly focused gameplay, perfectly determines the form of its gameplay. According to the three general attitudes of play that I have defined in a previous essay, the locale of *Silent Hill* is not for a *gameplayer* (Perron 2003, 251–53), a gamer that would play *with the game*,

an agent appropriating the formal structure of the game and essentially playing according to his goals and actions. As opposed to games that take full advantage of procedural authorship¹⁵ such as the famous *Grand Theft Auto* series (Rockstar North / Rockstar Games), *Silent Hill* does not enable the gamer to engage in challenges other than those created by the designers. The gamer might very well decide to shoot at everything, but this will simply exhaust the store of ammunition to no purpose. He cannot, for example, set himself a challenge to shoot out every shop window (they are armor-plated) or cut down all the trees with the chainsaw in a replay game of *SH1* and *SH2* (the blade cleaves through the air). He cannot go beyond the blocked streets. He cannot commit suicide by jumping off the bridge on Bloch Street in *SH1* or aim his rifle at himself whenever a situation becomes unbearable (we are in a *survival* horror game). He cannot intermingle with nonplayer characters (NPCs) since the interactions with them happen in cut-scenes. He can however decide to kill Maria when she follows him in *SH2*, but that ends the game. Yet, if *Silent Hill* does not let the gamer create the path through the game world, it does let him choose how he navigates the given world. The gamer can take the attitude of a *player* (Perron 2003, 244–51), improvising his way as much as possible, wandering freely around town and the various indoor locations. The detailed, real-time 3-D environment has been the chief draw of the series from the beginning. The games allow the player to simply walk around just to experience the graphics, forgetting for a while the goal of the search. This is a point I will return to later given its importance in differentiating survival horror gameplay: the actions of the *player* are observed in survival horror games.

All things considered, *Silent Hill* is designed for the archetypical gamer (Perron 2003, 242–44), that is, a pathfinder striving to traverse a zigzag narrative and who is required to fight monsters and various opponents. As Espen Aarseth has clearly pointed out (2003), one has to decide upon the type of gamer that he will be. Adding the *cheater* to the list, Aarseth is referring to Richard Bartle's (2006) four types of players to describe different styles of play: the *achievers* whose main goal is to accumulate points and/or rise levels; the *explorers* whose chief delight is in forcing the game to reveal its internal machinery; the *socializers* who are interested in making connections to others and social communication; and the *killers* who derive pleasure through dominating gameplay and related interaction. Although this typology was created to study multiuser real-time virtual worlds and therefore has to be adapted to single-player games (gamers and player char-

acters don't socialize much in survival horror games), I must admit that I do not really fit into any of those categories. For instance, I'm not a *cheater*. Even though, to use Aarseth's words, I consult walkthroughs "from time to time," I've never employed GameShark codes or other cheat codes (what's the point of having infinite ammunition in a survival anyway?!).¹⁶ I'm not an *achiever*. I never thought about playing *Silent Hill* in order to have the "10-Star Ranking"¹⁷ and I always chose the normal difficulty level, both for action and riddles. I'm not really an *explorer*. I do sometimes like to play a game again in order to unlock extras or see alternate endings, but this is not my main replay value. I'm not a *killer* either. This might be why I prefer *Silent Hill* to *Resident Evil*, because it's more a question of running away (but not hiding away as in the *Clock Tower* series, for example) from monsters than blowing their heads off. In fact, in keeping with Aarseth's definition of the adventure gamer, I consider myself more of an *intriguee*, the target of the intrigue (1997, 112–14). Though I come from a film studies background, I do have a bias in favor of story-driven games with a connection to cinema. It does not bother me to play the role of innocent, voluntary target¹⁸ of an ergodic intrigue or secret plot in which the possible outcomes depend on my clever actions. As an *intriguee*, I want to go through the multidimensional event space of the game and uncover its structure by negotiating this space. Apposite to this, Aarseth compares this unfolding to "the concept of a log, a recording of a series of experienced events" (1997, 114). In a survival horror game, I want this series of events to be truly frightening. I have replayed *Silent Hill* many times, particularly *SH2*, which I consider a masterpiece, primarily because it sent chills down my spine. Which leads me to the concept of experiential route.

To Get a Fright

In *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film: Film as an Emotion Machine*, one of my main theoretical references and the inspiration for the title of the present book (along with the Emotion Engine processor at the heart of the PlayStation 2), Ed S. Tan states that "from the perspective of the viewer, it could be said that what all natural viewers of the traditional feature film have in common is their desire to experience emotion as intensively and as abundantly as possible, within the safe margins of guided fantasy and closed episode" (1996, 39). He defines two types of induced emotion: first, fiction emotions, which are rooted in the fictional world with the concerns

addressed by that world, and second, artifact emotions, which arise from concerns related to the artifact, as well as stimulus characteristics based on those concerns (1996, 65). These distinctions structure chapters 2 and 3. Addressed in conversation with Noël Carroll's curiosity theory of fictional works of horror and the pleasures of ratiocination (1990), chapter 2 discusses the setting and story of *Silent Hill*, the way the gamer empathizes with the main protagonists (Travis, Harry, Heather, James, Henry, and Alex), and the impure nature and disgusting aspects of the monsters. Chapter 3 moves toward Grodal's conception of the game as map and system. "Our experience of 'art,'" says Grodal, "is based on our insight into the way in which a given creator realizes specific intentions that are only fully understandable as a choice selected among several possible options, and this demands expertise" (2003, 144). As "audio-video" games, the games of *Silent Hill* often force the gamer to be aware of the game's design (especially gamers with a film perspective like myself), to marvel at their graphics and their *mise-en-scène*. Chapter 3 investigates the aesthetic aspects of the series.

Although survival horror enthusiasts have a desire to experience fear as intensively and as abundantly as possible, and fiction emotions and artifact emotions are appropriate to video game studies, they can neither be considered straightforwardly nor be thought of as sufficient for the task. As an *intriguee*, I have a certain degree of control over the perception and the unfolding of the action. This notion of agency is central to the differentiation between film and video games in general, and particularly as it relates to the survival horror genre. As Tanya Krzywinska observes, film "is unable to exploit the potential of interactive devices to intensify an awareness of the dynamic between *being in control* and *out of control*, and this aspect is key to the specific types of suspense and emotion-based pleasures offered by horror games" (2002, 215–16). One can only agree with her assertion that "the interactive dimension of these particular games [*Resident Evil 3: Nemesis* (Capcom / Capcom 1999) and *Clive Barker's Undying* (ELEA / EA Games 2001)] is organized to intensify and extend the types of emotional and affective experiences offered by the horror film" (2002, 207). Chapter 4 therefore deals with what I will call gameplay emotions (see for instance Perron 2005a), which arise from the actions of the gamer in the game world and the reaction of this game world to those actions. I will address the role of navigation, battle, use of weapons, solution to riddles, and so on.

But to begin with, I summarize in chapter 1 the distinguishing formal characteristics of the survival horror genre as they appear in *Silent Hill*. To refer to the warning at the beginning of *SH1*: “There are violent and disturbing images in this [book]. The fear of blood tends to create fear for the flesh.”