

**Restless Dreams in *Silent Hill*: Approaches to Videogame Analysis**  
**Dr Ewan Kirkland**  
**Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College**  
**ekirklanduk@yahoo.co.uk**

In this paper I will be discussing the *Silent Hill* videogame, a successful survival horror franchise which began in 1999 with the first game of the series. The most recent release was *Silent Hill 4: The Room* in October 2004. My aim is to illustrate the ways in which traditional academic approaches to film, media and cultural studies can be productively applied to the audio-visual videogame text in a way which does justice to its complex nature. Despite the varieties and complexities of player engagement, it is my contention that there is a clear videogame text which can be deconstructed. This text includes traditional audio visual media characteristics such as characters, locations, virtual camera movements, narrative, *mise en scene*, sound effects and music, as well as interactive components such as physical and cerebral puzzles, multiple narrative pathways and multiple-endings.

A semiotic approach helps to illustrate the operation of the videogame text and the limitations of videogame interactivity.

As Steven Poole says: 'videogames talk to the player in a special sort of language, one which the experienced user knows by heart... Videogames talk to us in signs' (Poole, 2000, p189). Videogames can be understood as collections of visual and aural codes designed to illicit a response from the player. These might include the use of colour coding, arrows and targets directing the player's movement, lights illuminating areas to be moved towards, or the monstrous growls of enemies, distinguishing them from more harmless characters. These are amongst the visual and aural codes of the videogame. Successful playing involves reading these cues correctly and responding accordingly in order to meaningfully engage with the game text: to achieve a high score, to vanquish the enemy, to progress to the next level.

Players are free to ignore, misinterpret or defy these videogame cues. But the existence of such formal systems of signification points to the way games structure the seemingly unstructured interactive gaming experience. In this respect we may think of the videogame text as having a preferred playing, a version of the preferred reading which usefully incorporates a high score table.

So, how specifically might we unpack *Silent Hill* as a media text?

Generic types and categories are strongly present in videogames,

a point made by numerous writers on the subject. The *Silent Hill* series is located in the 'survival horror' videogame genre. The term 'survival horror' was first coined in the famous *Resident Evil* game. Other examples of the genre include *Clock Tower*, *Project Zero*, *Forbidden Siren* and *Obscure*. The genre might be understood as an action adventure game type, drawing on horror film iconography, in which a third person character must be led through a maze of streets and buildings, solving puzzles and fighting off monsters with limited ammunition, energy and means of replenishing it.

True to generic type, in the *Silent Hill* series various characters find themselves trapped in the town of Silent Hill. In the original game Harry Mason searches the town for his daughter. In its sequel James Sutherland comes in search of his dead wife Mary. In *Silent Hill 3* Heather comes to the town looking for her father's killer. In order to achieve their goals and escape the town, these characters must solve cryptic puzzles and fight or flee various grotesque monsters. Supplies of ammunition and health drinks are sparsely scattered throughout the game, and must be strictly conserved in order to succeed.

The series can be understood in terms of its relationship with other survival horror videogames, but also horror film and television texts. Aesthetically, *Silent Hill* is clearly rooted in horror and suspense, combining heavy use of shadows and darkness (often the only light is provided by the pocket torch all playable characters carry), and a sinister soundtrack (provided by the transistor radio all characters also possess which crackles and screeches with static whenever a threat is present). This creates a very expressionistic visual and audio experience. However, more specific cinema references include the Romero zombie films, Nicholas Roeg's *Don't Look Now* (1973), *Texas Chainsaw Massacre's* (1974), *Jacob's Ladder* (1990), *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *Psycho* (1960), *Les Diabolique* (1955), *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) and David Lynch's *Eraserhead* (1977). The town of Silent Hill bears traces both of *Blue Velvet's* (1986) Lumbertown, and *Twin Peaks* (1990), and other small town texts such as *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956).

So, *Silent Hill's* similarity to other audio visual texts helps us to situate the series in relation to popular Western culture, and opens the series up to the same considerations of cultural value, ideology and representation to which these more established texts have been subjected.

The series may for example be considered in terms of representations of gender and race.

Gender is a prominent critical framework within academic videogame debates. Key criticisms concern the recurring narrative of male heroes rescuing helpless female, the sexualised representation of female characters, and the overwhelming masculinity of the implied game player.

Both *Silent Hill* and its immediate sequel involve male protagonists rescuing non-playable female characters: Harry's daughter Cheryl and James' wife Mary. However, the fact James' wife is dead puts a perverse spin on this narrative formula. The fact Cheryl is a young girl also brings to bear additional meanings concerning the function of children in Western narrative culture, as either figures to be rescued, or an ambivalent threat. The children in *Silent Hill* represent both. More importantly, Harry's fatherhood and James' husband-hood domesticates, feminises and differentiates these male characters from their more traditional hyper-masculine cousins. This is also reflected in the nondescript nature of their avatars.

Heather from *Silent Hill 3* also differs from the fetishised female figures of *Soul Calibre* or *Grand Theft Auto* in her androgynous appearance and narrative centrality. Cassell & Jenkins apply Carol Clover's discussion of the slasher movie's 'final girl' to video game heroines. As Clover suggests, male identification with an imperilled female protagonist produces a greater sense of anxiety in male spectators, while not threatening traditional masculine qualities of strength and courage, so Cassell & Jenkins claim Lara Croft allows male players to flirt with danger without compromising their masculinity. While Clover's argues that horror movie heroines' tomboy characteristics appeases male resistance to trans-gender identification, Cassell & Jenkins note this is at odds with the hyper-femininity of Lara Croft (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000, p30-1). It could be argued, Heather's androgynous design successfully combines both the imperilled and masculine femininity of videogame and horror cinema.

More problematic is the femme fatale character of Maria a woman described in the *Silent Hill 2* manual as such:

On the surface, Maria looks exactly like James' late wife, however Maria's hairstyle and taste in clothing are completely different. Her personality, cheerful and energetic, is also the exact opposite of Mary's. When James first meets Maria, he is shocked by the resemblance as well as the intimacy of their conversation, as if they had known each other for years. After learning of his purpose in Silent Hill, Maria is interested in his search form Mary and decides to accompany him

(*Silent Hill 2: Director's Cut* manual, 2003, p3)

As Mary's sexualised counterpart or doppelganger, Mary and Maria reproduce the virgin/whore dichotomy attacked by many feminist critics. Maria's repeated violent death and resurrection throughout the game, and the revelation James murdered Mary who was suffering from a fatal illness, reflects a profound ambivalence towards women. in this instalment of the *Silent Hill* series. This is also emphasised in the monstrous femininity of the game's creatures: the female nurses and Legs monsters, and the final boss: a medusa-like creature transformed from a bedridden Mary which James must kill to escape.

Both Mary and Maria are variously coded as visual spectacle. Throughout the game the dead Mary appears only on a photograph carried by the protagonist,

and as a videotape found in a hotel room. In both photo and film, James is the implied spectator. The flashlight, a key object in *Silent Hill*, allowing the player to see their way through interior spaces, is discovered on a tailor's dummy wearing Mary's clothes, thereby connecting Mary with the visual. Maria's to-be-looked-at-ness is emphasised in her provocative attire, in her employment as an exotic dancer, and in the way James' gaze is drawn to Maria, his avatar turning towards her as she dutifully follows him in the playable sections where they are together.

While gender is a well-explored area of videogames and videogame culture, race is less frequently considered. In this final section I will consider the *Silent Hill* series in relation to Richard Dyer's discussion of racial and ethnic whiteness.

There are reasons for labelling *Silent Hill* a very white text. The streets of Silent Hill may first be understood as a distinctly white space. The fictional American small towns upon which *Silent Hill* draws are exclusively white districts. To this generic whiteness, the series adds a visual whiteness in the ever-present mist which shrouds the towns streets and alleyways.

*Silent Hill*, both town and game, are also white insofar as they contain no non-white characters. All four protagonists are Caucasian, as are all non-player characters. This includes Lisa Garland, the nurse from *Silent Hill*, Laura, the young girl from *Silent Hill 2*, and Claudia, the religious fanatic from *Silent Hill 3*, as blonde haired blue eyed women representing the whitest of whiteness. The whiteness of the characters' skin is exaggerated by the game's aesthetics. The pale, grainy, bleached-out pallet of the series gives its characters' skin a blanched, sickly, colour-less appearance.

In his study of Western pictorial representation, Dyer illustrates white people's special relationship with light (Dyer, 1997, Ch3). Illumination is central to the *Silent Hill* series. The flashlight is an essential object within the game. *Silent Hill* protagonists characteristically move through space casting light on their surroundings. Dyer's also discusses the blonde white woman's significant position in discourses of visual whiteness (Dyer, 1997, p124), and the relationship between blonde femininity and light is apparent in the Mary dummy's possession of the flashlight in *Silent Hill 2*.

Finally, Dyer speaks of white people's special relationship with death which resonates throughout the game. *Silent Hill* contains clear suggestions that its protagonist is dead, extending to supporting characters in *Silent Hill 2*. This game opens with James staring at his reflection in a toilet mirror, contemplating the futility of his quest: the search for a dead woman. In both Maria and Angela (another woman James meets) we have characters contemplating suicide while similarly staring into mirrors. At one point, James finds a room containing the graves of all the games' characters, himself included.

The characters' pallid complexions, their disorientated behaviour, even the ethereal, misty, deserted streets of Silent Hill contribute to an impression that the town represents a kind of limbo or afterlife, where dead white people come to relive the pain of their guilty past.

Cassell, Justine & Jenkins, Henry (eds) (2000) *From Barbie to Mortal Combat: Gender and Computer Games* Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: The MIT Press

Dyer, Richard (1997) *White* London: Routledge

Poole, Steven (2000) *Trigger Happy: The Inner Life of Videogames* London: Fourth Estate

If you would like a more detailed exploration of the issues raised in this paper, or to discuss any of its contents, feel free to contact me at the above email address.

Dr Ewan Kirkland, February 2005