Staring Into The Abyss – A Close Reading of *Silent Hill 2*

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My avatar, James Sunderland, parks his car in the deserted parking lot of Silent Hill, uses the badly maintained bathroom and muses about what brought him to this remote place.

It’s ridiculous, couldn’t possibly be true….That’s what I keep telling myself. A dead person can’t write a letter. Mary died of this damn disease three years ago. So then, why am I looking for her? Our “special place”…What could she mean? This whole town was our special place. Does she mean the park on the lake? We spent a whole day there, just the two of us, staring at the water. Could Mary really be there? Is she really alive…waiting for me?

From this moment on, I’m hooked. Spellbound, I play this single player horror survival game through to the end. Then I scratch my head. I had heard that the game was confusing and raised more questions than it answered. It was true. I knew now what the deal was with Mary, but there were so many things that still didn’t make a lot of sense. Still, I had a feeling that nothing in this game was completely random either. There simply had to be a key to understanding, something that made the pieces fall into place and shed some light on the strange events and creatures of Silent Hill. In the name of scientific rigour, I played the game again. And again. All in all, I played the game four times from beginning to end and parts of it several times more. Slowly, the metaphorical depth and richness that makes this game so unique and fascinating dawned on me. For me, the key to understanding is reading *SH2* as a metaphor for a psychotherapeutic process. In the following I will explain why. The text will contain major spoilers, so I recommend playing the game first.

I. On the Surface Level

Haven’t played the game? Here are the basics: *SH2* is a single-player horror survival game that had come out for the PS2 in 2001 but was given to me by a friend a couple of years later. It is one of four games that constitute the Silent Hill series, which have been published and developed by the game studio Konami. They are all deliciously scary and wonderful, but *SH2* is my favorite. I will read *SH2* in relation to itself, although in each game (except the first, of
course) there are many cross-references to the other parts of the series. The gameplay is rather straightforward and consists of navigating through the foggy town of Silent Hill, exploring all kinds of ramshackle and eerie locations, picking up, examining and combining objects, solving (mostly) lock and key puzzles and last but not least fighting monsters. It is possible to adjust the difficulty level for fighting and puzzle solving separately, tuning the gameplay experience to one’s personal preferences. I set fighting difficulty on “easy” and puzzle mode on “normal” (yeah, I’m lazy and my idea of entertainment is a game I can finish in a reasonable amount of time), but tried other configurations to check whether my interpretation still makes sense with fighting on “hard” and puzzles on “easy”, etc. It does.

What happens on the surface level of the game? When I played the game for the first time, this is what I saw, did and learned: in a cut scene I was told that my avatar, James Sunderland, has come to the town of Silent Hill to look for his dead wife, Mary, who appears to have sent him a letter, saying that she’s waiting for James at their “special place” in Silent Hill. It was clear from the start that there was a backstory here that I as a player didn’t know (yet), but James’ amnesia regarding Mary’s death (he seems to be unsure if his wife truly died) created the assumption that somehow my avatar and I were on the same page and we could figure it all out together. The gap between me and James seemed small in the beginning, but over time (and especially in retrospect), I realized that James wasn’t one of these tabula rasa characters that simply served as a projection screen for the player’s intentions. There is a big and significant distinction between James and the player that I will analyze in more detail in a later section of this paper. For now, let me clarify that James is the character in the game’s story, I’m the player of the game and thus our goals and intention don’t always match. It therefore makes sense to view James and me as two separate entities and I will acknowledge this distinction by talking about “us” when James and my actions, goals and intentions overlap. I will refer to James as his own character, when I’m dealing with the prescripted, story related parts of the game. Whenever James’ perspective is irrelevant and my experience or actions as a player are in the foreground, I will say “I”.

So, after the cut scene, I tried to make my way from the parking lot into town. Assumedly, it had considerably changed since the couple’s last visit. It was now full of monsters and strange creatures, the buildings were all deserted and a permanent fog suggested that this was not the tourist attraction it might have once been. The only other people James and I encountered on our quest were Angela, a woman who was looking for her mother; Laura, a young girl who
didn’t seem to be aware of any monsters; and Eddie, a fat guy whose background story remained largely unknown, but who, just like James and Angela, turned out to have committed a crime. James, Angela and Eddie seemed to have been called to Silent Hill by some higher force and to all three of them the town was dangerous, although in different ways. Our first goal was to get to the park, because James had a hunch that this was what Mary had meant by their “special place”. Where would be the fun if we could have just taken the bus to get there? Reaching this first goal was postponed for a while, giving me some opportunity to explore this eerie town and its deserted, creepy apartment buildings. I had to solve lots of lock and key puzzles and to gather clues regarding the mystery about Mary.

When we finally reached the park, Mary was nowhere to be found. Instead, we made the acquaintance of Maria, a woman who could have been Mary’s twin sister, but sexier and more coquettish. I learned over time that Maria mysteriously knew things about James only Mary could know: she knew about James always being forgetful, she knew about a video he had made of Mary at the Lakeview Hotel and she knew that he had forgotten to take the video with him when they left. Like the girl Laura before her, Maria suspected that James had not loved Mary. “Maybe you hated her,” she said and although it sounded as if she was just teasing him, the suspicion gained shape that James was not the loving husband one might have believed him to be. Still, Maria wanted our protection from the monsters and became our companion. At the same time, a new goal was established: the Lakeview Hotel where James and Mary had stayed during their visits in Silent Hill. Again, getting there was far from straightforward. The journey led us – now accompanied by Maria – to the Brookhaven Hospital. There, Maria was killed for the first time by a creature called Pyramid Head, the game’s recurring boss monster and the tone of the game turned from scary to sad, with melancholic music and a crushed looking James. We had to continue alone.

The only way to the Lakeview Hotel led through Silent Hill’s Historical Society. From the outside the building did not look particularly big, but what I did not know was that from now on, the path led down, down and further down and there was a lot of underground space to explore. Labyrinths, vertical corridors, underground prisons and courtyards, even James own grave would be found there. When I found the grave, I stood before it for a moment, not knowing what to do. Was I really expected to jump into a grave? Wasn’t that bad luck or

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1 The lock and key puzzles in *SH2* actually deserve to be explored in another article, because they are often connected to the game’s narrative. For example in a later part of the game, I had to perform a symbolical execution of James, Angela and Eddie to be rewarded with a horseshoe which I could then – with the help of a waxdoll and a lighter – transform into a handle for a trapdoor. Sometimes, the puzzles are just bizzar – who would suspect to find a lightbulb in a can of food? Is this dreamlogic or do these puzzles also have a deeper meaning?
something? Finally, I jumped in and, unsurprisingly, the journey continued further down into the abyss. Pyramid Head was patrolling the underground labyrinths, dragging his oversized butcher’s knife behind him, but a confrontation could be avoided. At one point Maria showed up again, locked away in a prison cell in an underground labyrinth. A little later, she was killed once more by Pyramid Head.

After a long descent, I exited the Historical Society and found myself in the open, facing the lake surrounding the Lakeview Hotel. The only way to get to the hotel was by taking a rowboat.

There, James finally had to face the truth (I thought: finally, my persistency as player is rewarded and I’ll find out what’s going on here!) namely that what he had feared the most was true: he had killed Mary. The key to this insight was a video, perhaps the one he forgot to take with him at the end of the couple’s last visit. It started harmless enough, but then, suddenly, the disturbing pictures of him suffocating Mary with a pillow appeared on the TV screen. This left no doubt about what had happened. Obviously, the video wasn’t all James had forgotten. When the show was over, we heard Mary’s voice. She was calling James, telling him she was nearby, waiting for him. And so we went on. But before finding Mary, we were again confronted with Maria. This time, she was killed by two Pyramid Heads. James realized: “I was weak. That’s why I needed you [Maria]…. Needed someone to punish me for my sins…. But that’s all over now. I know the truth. Now it’s time to end this.” After that, we attacked the Pyramid Heads until they gave up and killed themselves (!).

In the last scene of the game before the final video sequence, James found himself sitting at Mary’s sickbed and he told her everything, how desperate he was, how he could not see her suffer, but also that part of him hated her for taking away his life and that he wanted her to die. Mary understood. She had asked him to kill her, had wanted to die, had hated herself for being sick and ugly and she forgave him: “You killed me and you’re suffering for it. It’s enough, James.” There are several endings to the game, but in the one I got when I played the game the first time, James leaves town after that, the fog has lifted, the sun is shining and the town seems to be rid of monsters. The following analysis is based on my first play-through that resulted in this particular ending. However, the interpretation is still valid in regard to the other endings, which, as I will explain later, I believe is actually the strongest argument for reading SH2 in the suggested way.

II. Going Beneath the Surface
SH2 is gratifying in many regards. The graphics are evocative, exploring the world provides many voyeuristic pleasures, the sound design adds greatly to the unique atmosphere of the game, the monsters add tension to the playing experience, the puzzles are entertaining in their strangeness and the whole thing is pleasurably scary and kept me on edge for many hours. One can play the game and enjoy it for all these reasons without ever gaining a deeper understanding of its underlying meaning. In regard to solving the mystery of the letter, it might be good enough to know that James had killed Mary and that he had come to Silent Hill to somehow be forgiven for it, to come to terms with it, to move on. But for me, this raised more questions than it answered – I wanted to really understand this game and that meant to going beneath the surface. This first ending only provided the key to one possible interpretation that made everything that seemed strange and implausible at first believable in retrospect. To me, SH2 is a metaphorical representation of a psychotherapeutic process, specifically one that deals with coming to terms with overwhelming guilt. I follow an understanding of psychotherapy as a means to uncover problems that are outside the patient’s awareness and to provide insights into these problems on an emotional, not just intellectual level. By making the unconscious conscious, the “stuck” or “lost” patient should become able to cope with his / her issues and to move on to lead a happy and productive life. The key to psychotherapy thus is awareness. “To get over his symptoms, a person must face exactly that which his defenses were created to protect him from; he must face his worst nightmare.”2 In the following I will point out how seeing SH2 through this lens makes its unreal elements emotionally intelligible and allows a coherent reading of the game.

The main point of SH2 is that the truth about a repressed event has to be uncovered. The patient (James) needs to remember, to work through emotional issues, unlock hidden thoughts, confront his fears and repressed feelings and take responsibility for his deed in order to be healed. In that sense, SH2 does not portray an objective reality, but a projection of James’ mental state onto the game-world. While the game-world features many codes of verisimilitude – behaving according to physics, the impression of depth that is brought about by the illusion of perspective and further enhanced by the movement within the game world, a photorealistic representation as well as a convincing sound-design – it also strongly conveys the feeling of unreality. The town is deserted, except for the strange creatures that attack James when he comes too close. An unnatural fog makes it hard to see. The only other people James meets are strange and secretive and like himself, they seem to have been somehow

2 For more information on what psychotherapy is, you can visit this website http://www.aboutpsychotherapy.com/index.html. The quote is taken from the part “What’s the Cure? What does Psychotherapy do?”
summoned by this town. James finds hints about Silent Hill’s past, saying it has been erected on sacred ground, but the town itself does not seem to be bad or dangerous, at least not for everybody. Laura, a young girl James meets and who claims to have been friends with Mary, does not see any demons. When he asks her what a young girl like herself is doing in a place like this she asks: “huh? Are you blind?” For Laura, Silent Hill is perfectly safe.

*SH2*’s dominant hermeneutic mechanism is the uncanny. “The uncanny is characterized by seemingly unreal events that are symptomatic of a hidden, unsafe, fearful, dreadful or dangerous reality” (Spoors 2005, p.98). The reality that lies behind the unreal world of Silent Hill is that James has killed his terminally ill wife and now needs to come to terms with that fact. His search for Mary is an exploration of his own psyche. The town of Silent Hill becomes the projection screen for that inner journey. It is a spatial metaphor for the mind. Mary is waiting there, because she is “on his mind”. What is interesting about Silent Hill is that it does not only seem to work that way for James, but for its other visitors as well: Eddie, Angela and Laura all see and experience different things there, as they have different things on their minds. I’d like to suggest that Silent Hill stands for the mind as an objectively existing concept that is individually modelled by each person’s emotional preconditions, struggles and issues – a sort of collective unconscious, maybe, that creates an archetypical infrastructure which is then further shaped by a person’s personal fears, thoughts and emotions (see Jung 1938). In Silent Hill, inner conflicts materialize themselves in a most disconcerting and often dangerous way.

Codes of the uncanny can also be found in the game’s camera perspectives and movements, which often do not aim at giving the impression of objective observation but deliberately draw attention to themselves, adding a sense of uneasiness and paranoia to the represented world. A good example is the game’s intro animation: James is standing in front of a mirror in a dirty public restroom, staring at his reflection. Following this point of view shot, the camera takes position in a far corner of the restroom, watching James from beneath a lavatory. The camera angle is tilted to the right, straightening itself a little during the scene. There is no objective reason for this perspective or shifting of camera angle. It creates the feeling of dissociation from James; something does not seem to be in synch. One could also go a step further and interpret the first shot – James looking at his reflection in the mirror – as a prelude to his journey into his subconscious, the beginning of psychotherapy. He is looking at himself, questioning himself, wondering what happened to Mary. (Or, to take this thought
further, he is talking to a therapist, who, like a mirror, reflects his thoughts back to him.) Then the camera moves away from James and looks up at him from the bottom, suggesting that there is something lurking down there, waiting for a chance to come to the surface – and to the surface come his fears and his repressed feelings. They emerge from the bottom of his mind, creating the chimerae and monsters that make Silent Hill a dangerous place.

II.I. Metaphorical Space and Therapeutical Progress

Psychotherapy is a long, intricate process. There is no straight path to the source of a problem. Remembering can be painful and slow, and sidetracking is a common phenomenon. Sometimes it might feel like going in circles, or navigating through dense fog. Describing therapy in this way makes its connection to spatial metaphors apparent (see words in italics). Reading SH2 as a metaphor for therapy first and foremost suggests a metaphorical reading of its gamespace. At first glance, SH2 employs a range of game conventions to guide the player’s progress through the gamespace. As I said before, it took me a while to get to my first goal, Rosewater Park. But postponing my progress did not simply serve the function of prolonging play. The roadblocks that forced me to find another route to the park did not only represent (sometimes rather unconvincing) physical obstacles, but James’ mental blockades. It was necessary that we first explored specific areas of the mind, represented by the many rooms and corridors of the Wood Side Apartment buildings, to achieve the (emotional) breakthroughs in James that made new parts of Silent Hill accessible. This would explain why certain roadblocks suddenly disappeared or shifted to somewhere else after we were done poking around a specific area of town. Since I was oblivious of the game’s metaphorical meaning at first, I didn’t realize the symbolic relevance of these game conventions. The same is true for the many lock and key puzzles I had to solve in the apartment buildings. Normally such puzzles are just opportunities to test one’s wit. In SH2 they can be regarded as a pretty abstract representation of decoding hidden thoughts, unlocking memories and gathering clues that might lead to the source of the problem. Of course, some clues might be misleading, or they might become dead ends. After all, not every theme one touches upon in therapy is relevant to the problem at hand. Still, a thorough investigation of the darkest corners and scariest hallways is necessary to progress in the therapeutical process and to solve the mystery surrounding Mary’s letter.

Throughout the game, this progress can be saved. Save points are indicated by what look like glowing red pieces of paper. We found the first one at the bottom of a well in the woods.
shortly before we entered town. When we looked down the well, writing appeared on the screen, displaying James’ thoughts: “There’s something in the well. What’s that…? Looking at this makes me feel like someone’s groping around inside my skull…It gives me a weird feeling.” The red piece of paper alone would not be so special, but the accompanying words make it symbolically meaningful. They fit the metaphor of psychological archeology and can be interpreted as milestones in the process of discovering the truth. They are points in James’ memory to which he can return when he gets overwhelmed by his personal demons, and try anew.

Until we got to Rosewater Park, however, things were still relatively harmless. Sure, there was scary stuff going on – monsters attacked us when we get too close and Pyramid Head had already introduced himself – but only when James meets Maria, when he is getting closer to the core of the matter and the relevant themes become more apparent, do the inner conflicts manifest themselves in a more direct way.

The next location after the park was the hospital. Again, many lock and key puzzles had to be solved. Also, Maria was not feeling so well, so I had to leave her behind in one of the hospital rooms and to go on alone. I didn’t realize it then, but this created another disquieting parallel between Maria and Mary. I should have started worrying about her then.

So far, the space was not exactly welcoming and friendly, but it was about to get a lot worse. After another encounter with Laura, and after James had been pushed from the roof by Pyramid Head, the hospital turned into a nightmarish place. It looked like it was painted with blood and when I checked in on Maria in her room, she was gone. She would show up again later, blaming James for not having tried to save her. What had happened? What caused the space to change? Maybe our exploration of the hospital and unlocking some dark memories there, explicitly drawing the parallel between Mary and Maria and the feelings of guilt that were attached to that, might have caused James to view the environment with different eyes.

Of course, there was no way I could have even speculated about that while I was playing the game for the first time, since there is a strong disconnect between player and avatar in SH2 – I will come back to this later.

The exploration started in a harmless way; one could almost imagine the therapist asking “so, tell me about the time when Mary was in the hospital” and James trying to recount the events more or less objectively. After a while (and probably after some uncomfortable questions), themes of guilt and responsibility began to arise and the account of the hospital episode became more of a personal recollection of feelings rather than events. In the game, Laura is
the one to make the most straightforward reproaches, telling James he didn’t love Mary. It was only after James met Laura and was lured into a trap by her where I had to fight against doormen (evil doors that hang from the ceiling and attack him) that the hospital environment changed. Apparently, although only in retrospect, I had to destroy the doors in order to reach the deeper levels of James’ subconscious where the real issues were buried.

Next, James had to finally acknowledge the death of a loved one, even if it was the death of the substitute love Maria, instead of his wife Mary. After Maria had followed James around for a little while, afraid and hoping for protection, Pyramid Head showed up again. He attacked from behind. The only chance I had here was to run away and take the elevator going up. In the cut scene that ended the encounter with Pyramid Head, the elevator doors closed before Maria could reach them and James (and I) witnessed how she was speared to death from behind by Pyramid Head. It was a most gruesome scene and one brimming with symbolical potential. Not only did James (not me!) experience the pain of losing a loved one once again, but the question of responsibility was addressed, too. Maria had complained before that James had not protected her and it did not matter that he hadn’t known where she was and hadn’t been aware that she had needed protection. It’s important that the issue was raised at all. As a player, I felt guilty for saving my own ass and leaving Maria to die. I tried to fight Pyramid Head, but he was far too strong for me and I got killed every time I tried to stand up to him. Running, behaving like a coward, was my only hope and so I literally enacted James’ metaphorical fear of confrontation with Pyramid Head. Pyramid Head, whatever he symbolizes (and I will come to that soon), is so overwhelming that confrontation is not possible at this point. There was no other recourse but to let him kill Maria and experience the feelings of guilt and helplessness the scene evoked. It certainly is no coincidence that helplessness, guilt and mourning are all themes attached to the hospital. When they become overwhelming and cannot be dealt with at that point, the only way is up to the surface and higher levels of consciousness, where it is easier (and necessary) to deal with other things first. So James and I left the hospital basement, where his repressed memories and feelings were stored and had just manifested themselves in the brutal murder scene by taking the elevator going upwards. The level – or therapy session – was almost over.

The only thing left to do at the hospital was to identify the next goal. In the director’s office I found a memo saying “He who is not bold enough to be stared at from across the abyss is not bold enough to stare into it himself. The truth can only be learned by marching forward. Follow the map. There’s a letter and a wrench.”
It’s like a reminder that therapy demands courage. It also strongly supports the theory that Pyramid Head is some deeply buried fear that “stared” at James from across the abyss – the hospital basement – and that James was not bold enough to face yet. If he wants to heal he needs to continue his exploration, to go as deep as possible and to actively seek out the monsters, instead of being sought by them. Otherwise he will be stuck in his unfortunate situation, repeating and reliving dreadful events over and over again. The hint to follow the map can be understood as following the guidance of a therapist, who might be able to point James in the right direction. On the gameplay level, this further fosters expectations about a new level coming up soon, one that will be even scarier than the ones before. More reason to stay put!

However, reaching the place where the letter and wrench could be found was not as straightforward as suggested in the memo. It was not possible to simply look at the map and know where I had to go next, since the letter and wrench were in the other part of town and to bring up the map of that part, I needed to go there first. I expected my next goal to be clearly displayed on the map, but there was no big red ink cross marking my destination. My heart sank. I have a very poor sense of orientation and it’s really easy to get lost in Silent Hill. I sighed and started to run, got lost, stopped, checked streetnames, checked my map, discovered I had been running in circles, ran some more and finally got frustrated and anxious that I’d never find my way back to the other part of town. I leaned back on my couch and mouthed an awestruck “wow”. The game had managed to synch my emotions with those of James. I knew what I had to do (i.e. find the letter and wrench), but I couldn’t quite get to where I was supposed to do it. I felt lost, disoriented, anxious and increasingly frustrated. These feelings fitted the situation perfectly. James had just lost Maria and was presumably reliving feelings of guilt and sadness because he had been unable to save her. Being in such a state of mind would certainly also hinder goal-oriented, purposeful action. Stumbling around in the dark – an emotional rather than a physical darkness – trying to get one’s bearings was an obvious metaphor. So, the retardation I experienced while searching for a way to the other part of town added a feeling of confusion and aimlessness to the scene that made it appear more authentic, more desperate. False-attribute is a powerful thing when it comes to creating identification with the player avatar.

Finally in the other part of town, where I could consult the corresponding map, I saw the words “letter and wrench” at Lindsey Street where I was rewarded by finding both items on
the porch of a house. But of course, this was only the first step towards a more important, more promising goal – the aforementioned abyss. Where could it be? What could be meant? The letter provided a further hint:

Or perhaps you are a fool. The truth usually betrays people. A part of that abyss is found in the old society. The key to the society is in the park. At the foot of the praying woman, inside the ground, inside of a box. To open it, I need a wrench. My patient buried it there. I knew, but did nothing. It made me uneasy to have such a thing near. I wasn’t looking for the truth, I was looking for tranquility. I also saw that thing. I fled, but the museum was sealed as well. Now no one dares to approach that place. If you still do not wish to stop, James, I pray to the Lord to have mercy upon your eternal soul.

Two more goals were introduced here: the park, where I found the key to the old Historical Society museum, and the museum itself, where the abyss was located. The letter evoked further expectations about the unspeakable dangers and psychological challenges that awaited James if he insisted on proceeding. And it raised an interesting question: how come the hospital director, who has written the letter, directly addresses James? And why are the letter and wrench on a porch? It seems like the director is leading James to the museum. Is he a psychiatrist, whose voice reaches James in his nightmarish hypnosis, leading him to the source of his trauma? The next destination was the praying woman in the park where I found the key that unlocked the door to the Historical Society.

The Historical Society, like the Apartment Buildings and the Brookhaven Hospital, presented a new chapter or level in the game, and opening its door was an act seething with expectations about the new adventures I was about to experience very soon. It also has been announced as an important step towards the solution of the mystery, thus bringing the background interest of the embedded narrative into the foreground again, giving me an additional reason to keep playing. The Historical Society featured many more psychological metaphors along the lines of those already discussed, most prominently the long vertical hallways I had to jump down to advance in my journey, more labyrinths inhabited by Pyramid Head, a morgue, a graveyard, and a complete underground prison full of mysterious hints and clues. The space was teeming with themes of guilt, death, punishment and redemption as well as the pervasive spatial metaphor of diving into subconsciousness. The name “Historical Society” deserves a moment of reflection, too. It suggests that the things encountered there are somehow connected to past events – specifically, the visitor’s private history – which supports the argument that the game is about remembering the source of a trauma. James is literally taking a stroll (or fall) down memory lane that will lead him to the truth. More and more clues suggested that the truth
required acknowledging death. At one point, I had to jump into my avatar’s grave. When I finally exited the Historical Society, I found myself on the shores of Toluca Lake. I was puzzled. After going down for so long, I had expected a long climb up again, to reach the surface, but the world hadn’t lost its symbolic meaning yet. I crossed the lake in a rowing boat to get to the Lakeview Hotel, the special place where Mary would be waiting. Analogies to the mythical river Acheron that separates the land of the Living from the land of the Dead (Hades) come to mind. And truly, this was where James finally met his dead wife.

II.II. Mean and Meaningful Inhabitants

It should be well established now that space in SH2 has a double function. On the one hand it provides the physical surface on which the moment-to-moment gameplay happens: spatial progression is game progression. On the other hand, space has a deeper, metaphorical meaning. What about the inhabitants of Silent Hill? How much do they contribute to the game’s reading as a psychotherapeutical process? Basically, there are two sorts of characters: people who objectively exist and have been called to Silent Hill for similar reasons as James, such as Angela and Eddie, and characters who are projections of James’ mind, such as Maria and the monsters. Angela and Eddie deserve a closer look since they support the claims made about the game’s main themes – guilt, punishment and redemption. After that I will investigate the characters that are projections of James’ twisted soul, to further argue the game’s metaphorical meaning.

In a sense SH2 is a case study of three people who are guilty of murder and who have been drawn to Silent Hill to confront that guilt: Angela, Eddie and – most importantly – James. Angela and Eddie add color to the game, fostering hypothesis building about what the game is about and showing what happens when one fails to come to terms with the past. Angela is a young woman who has come to Silent Hill in order to find her mother – or so she claims – but it is more likely that she is actually looking for her father and brother. My first encounter with Angela happened at the town’s cemetery before I entered Silent Hill. A cut scene showed how Angela tried to read the inscriptions of the gravestones and explained to James how she thought that her father and brother were buried here, but she can’t find their graves. Interesting. A husband is unsure if his wife, who died three years ago from an illness, is actually dead, and a woman who thought her relatives were buried at this specific cemetery and who cannot find their graves. It looks like both, James and Angela, have some skeletons
in their closets. In Angela’s case, her guilt makes her suicidal. When we met her again in the Blue Creek Apartments, she was lying on the floor of a deserted room, holding a knife and apparently playing with the thought of using it to end her life. The dialogue that occurred between Angela and James was illuminating:

Angela: “You’re the same as me. It’s easier just to run. Besides, it’s what we deserve.”
James: “No…I’m not like you.”
Angela: “Are you afraid? I, I’m sorry.”
James: “It’s O.K. Did you find your mother?”
Angela: “No, she’s not anywhere.”
James: “Did she live in this building?”
Angela: “I don’t know…”
James: “So, all you know is she lived in this town?”
Angela: “What did you say? How do you know that?”
James: “Well, I just figured, cause this is where you’re looking for her. How else would I know?”
Angela: “Yeah…”
James: “Am I right?”
Angela: “I’m so tired…”
James: “So, why did you come to this town anyway?”
Angela: “I, I’m sorry. Did you find the person you were looking for?”
James: “Not yet. Her name’s Mary. She’s my wife…”
Angela: “I’m sorry.”
James: “It’s okay. Anyway, she’s dead. I don’t know why I think she’s here.”

Angela tells him that she needs to find her mother. James asks her about the knife and she is about to give it to him, but before he can take it, she screams and threatens him with it. Then she realizes what she is doing and apologizes. Angela: “I’m sorry…I’ve been bad…Please don’t”. Apparently, Angela feels like she’s been bad a lot of the time. She also seems to be afraid of James. Please don’t do what? What is she expecting James will do to her? Her constant apologies reinforce the guilt-theme but her defensive stance suggests that she is used to being mistreated and, when desperate enough, willing to use the knife against the offender rather than against herself. It is never stated explicitly, but there is evidence in the game that she was sexually abused by her brother and father, which drove her to kill them. E.g. there is a
puzzle in the game that requires the player to find three tablets. Each tablet stands for one of the three perpetrators called to Silent Hill – James, Angela and Eddie. The locations of the tablets as well as their peculiar denominators are significant. Angela’s tablet carries the inscription “Tablet of the Seductress” and can be found in the shower room of the underground prison in the Historical Society. Clearly, Angela does not behave like a seductress, but rape victims often shift the guilt from their abusers onto themselves, feeling dirty and responsible for the deed. The fact that Angela’s tablet sits in the shower room further supports that theory, implying dirtiness and the wish to cleanse oneself, both physically as well as emotionally.

The last time I came across Angela was at the Lakeview Hotel. For a short while, I saw the world the way Angela sees it: a burning nightmare, a living hell. No wonder she didn’t want to live anymore. Perhaps there was no salvation for her because she was looking for the wrong person. It would have made more sense to look for her brother and her father and to finally put the blame where it belonged instead of eternally torturing herself, hoping for comfort from someone who clearly didn’t do a good job in protecting her. Who cares where mom is now; where was she, when her daughter needed her most?

While Angela is barking up the wrong tree, Eddie isn’t really looking for anything at all. In another cut scene James meets Eddie for the first time in the Wood Side Apartments. He is vomiting heavily into a toilet. It is unclear what’s wrong with him, but something seems to make him terribly sick (a dead body in the room?). Is it fear of the monsters? Disgust? Sure, the building is in dire need of maintenance and cleaning but it doesn’t look that bad – at least from James’ perspective. But then again, we don’t know what Eddie’s private purgatory looks like. Unlike James, who decided to come to Silent Hill and is determined to find his wife or at least find out what had happened to her, Eddie laments his presence there. He complains that he’s not even from this town. “You, too, huh?” says James. “Something just brought you here?” And Eddie confirms: “Ummm….yeah. You could say that.” Of course, there is no way of knowing for sure, since Eddie’s background story is not fully revealed, but this short exchange creates the impression that Eddie is neither ready nor willing to face whatever it is that is haunting him. I learned later that he, too, has killed someone, but he didn’t seem to regret it much. To the contrary, he turns into an enemy later in the game, attacking me so I didn’t have a choice but to kill him. By the way: his tablet is labeled “Tablet of the Gluttonous Pig” and I found it in a cafetería.
Finally, there’s James, the most interesting case of them all and the hardest to grasp. He is the key to all that still seems strange, namely who Maria is and what Pyramid Head represents. We already know that Mr. Nice Guy has killed his wife. His guilt is so strong that he has repressed the act. He cannot bear to accept the fact that he was capable of murdering Mary. Admitting what had happened would mean admitting that he was a bad, unloving husband – no, more than that, a killer, a terrible, disgusting monster, capable of unspeakable brutality – or at least that’s how he sees it. Just like Angela and Eddie, James also has a tablet that reveals the shameful self-perception that haunts him. His tablet is found in an underground prison cell of the Historical Society. Its label, “Tablet of the Oppressor” addresses the brutal, male dominance James finds within him and dreads so much to admit to himself. But closing your eyes never makes the monsters go away, does it? No, they just grow stronger and meaner.

James’ personal nemesis is Pyramid Head. He is introduced raping two Mannequin monsters in the Wood Side Apartments. There is a significant connection between the Mannequin monsters and Mary that also strengthens the connection between James and Pyramid Head, which shouldn’t go unnoticed: in one of the rooms of the Wood Side Apartments, James finds a flashlight attached to a dressmaker’s dummy who is wearing the exact same dress Mary is wearing on James’ photograph and in a later video sequence. The room was strewn with female mannequin parts that sprang to life and started to attack the moment I took the flashlight. One could say that this introduction of the Mannequin monsters highlights James’ perception of Mary as an empty, lifeless shell – or at least, what he fears to be his perception of her. It’s also noteworthy that the Mannequin monsters consist of two lower body parts. Where the upper part should be, there is another lower part with dangling feet instead of a head. They are clearly not designed for conversation. In the subsequent video sequence, James hides in a closet, observing the rape scene. When Pyramid Head comes close, James fires at him with his handgun until the monster leaves the room. Pyramid Head is indicated as not only having volatile attitudes towards females, but also as being extremely strong, because the bullets seemed to merely annoy him. Obviously, James is not ready to confront his biggest fear yet.

Much attention to detail went into the design of Pyramid Head. He looks like a big, strong man, wearing a Ku Klux Klan cowl. The oversized knife he’s carrying is more than just an instrument of death, but a very archaic and extraordinarily brutal one. In combination, the cowl and the knife conjure up images of executioners from past times and indeed, that’s what
he’s supposed to represent. Much later in the game, I found a picture of a Pyramid Head in the Historical Society. It had the caption “Executioner from Past Times” – he’s the epitome of a murderer. Therefore, there is no fighting with him: a direct confrontation results in certain death. The only thing I could do was avoid the lethal blows from the monster’s butcher’s knife until it walked away and hid again in James’ subconscious. There was one significant exception, where an encounter with the odious alter ego ended with James being pushed from the roof of the Brookhaven Hospital. What happened here? Maybe a glimmer of awareness – after all, the scene happens on an elevated space, not in a basement – made James realize the connection between him and the monster, making him want to kill himself. He survives the fall, but barely. It’s possible to argue that the scene represents a moment of acute depression, caused by self-awareness. Pyramid Head’s main function, however, is to kill Maria.

For those who haven’t already guessed, Maria is a fantasy. She’s a result of James’ longing for a healthy, sexy wife – an idealized version of the late Mary. Apparently, James does not want to admit this to himself. His fantasy is locked away in his subconscious, just like Maria is locked away in a prison cell in the Historical Society. Following one of the patterns of psychological trauma, the traumatic event has to be relived until one has found a strategy to cope with it. Thus, Maria is killed over and over and over again by Pyramid Head because this is how James relives his guilt for killing Mary. Near the end of the game, before James finally confronts Mary, he realizes: “I was weak. That’s why I needed you [Maria]… Needed someone to punish me for my sins…. But that’s all over now. I know the truth. Now it’s time to end this.” After that, James attacks the Pyramid Heads (in this scene there are two of them). Knowing the truth and accepting it makes him strong enough to finally face his fears and the Pyramid Heads give up and kill themselves (!). A big breakthrough in the therapeutic process but not the last.

I have already roughly described the end: James gets rid of Maria and apologizes to Mary for having killed her. She forgives him, but then, something surprising happens. Mary turns into the last boss of the game. Strapped to the hospital bed that now hangs from the ceiling, she attacks James and I had to kill her. This was utterly disturbing to me. The poor woman, I thought, can’t she rest in peace? Why would Mary become a boss after the mystery had been solved? Was James such a bastard that he wanted to kill her again? In the light of the game’s metaphorical reading, however, even this part makes sense: repeating the murder stands for its absolute acknowledgment, for the acceptance of the fact that it truly happened. Enacting it yet again means taking full responsibility for it. With this insight, James leaves Silent Hill a new
man. At least this was how the game ended for me when I first played it. It is not the only way it can end. The intriguing but problematic thing about *SH2* is that the player actively constructs the final meaning of the game and thus has some influence over the success of James’ therapy.

II.III. James and the Player – forced identification

James is the hardest case to interpret because he’s both the main character of the game’s story and also the player’s avatar. As such, James’ mind is coinhabited by the player’s. This form of pragmatic schizophrenia is not unusual in games. However, it normally makes a coherent interpretation of the avatar and his / her behavior in regard to the game’s story quite difficult, if not impossible. Players usually don’t enact an ideal story – at least not in the first playthrough. Take *James Bond* games, for example. While you learn how to be as cool, cunning and competent as James Bond, you normally act like an idiot. Not taking cover when being shot at, forgetting to reload, getting lost, driving against water hydrants and being killed – all of this is far from an ideal realization of the James Bond character. The ideal story is constituted by all the things the player finally got right minus his / her mishaps, just like the bad takes that happen during a movie production don’t end up in the final cut.

Not so in *SH2*. In *SH2* it is not only possible but necessary to take all the player’s actions into account when interpreting and making sense of the character James Sunderland. In this game, the player *always* realizes an ideal story and nothing, not even the stupidest behavior has to be disregarded for this story to make perfect sense. Why is that? Since the whole game can be read as a metaphor for James’ psychotherapeutical process, everything James does has symbolic meaning. If progress through the game-space is analogous to progress in uncovering the truth, it is significant how long it takes to solve a particular lock-and-key puzzle (“ah, there is a stubborn thought that hides in the dark!”) or if one attacks every monster in the way (“OK, inner demons, here I come – and this time it’s personal!”) or tries to avoid them (“I’ll just ignore you as long as you ignore me, deal?”) or just runs in circles in the fog (“lalala, I’m going craaazyyyy, lalala!”). Since it’s the player who does all these things, all the player’s actions are meaningful in regard to the game’s story. The game provides the player with some basic info about James (e.g. misses dead wife; might have some sort of amnesia) but what she does with this info is up to her. The player’s behavior and playing style completes James’ personality, and determines who he is. How heartbroken is he? Does he
really want to find Mary or would he rather be with Maria, insisting on denial? Does he waste a lot of time struggling with all kinds of inner demons or is his search for the truth straightforward? Does he get distracted and disoriented easily? Is he sadistically stomping on the dead monsters before he moves on, reinforcing his image as a killer? In this regard, choosing one’s difficulty level already has an effect on James’ perception. A hard difficulty level for fighting and easy puzzles make James’ inner conflict seem to be of a more violent nature than a difficulty setting that emphasizes cerebral struggle over a physical one.

Although the game is rather linear, the player actively constructs its final meaning and influences its outcome. Playing the game for the first time can result in three different endings, one of which I’ve already discussed. Since they are the most significant ones, I will stick to them. There are some joke endings one can get after having beaten the game at least once, but being joke endings, I will ignore them.

The “In Water Ending”: To get this ending, one has to keep a low health status when wounded, examine the knife one gets from Angela and read the suicide journal on the rooftop of Brookhaven Hospital. In this ending, James recovers the dead Mary, carries her to his car and drives them both into Toluca Lake. Now that the truth cannot further be denied, it is too hard to bear and James ends his life. Obviously, therapy was not an overall success.

The “Maria Ending”: to get this ending, one has to take good care of Maria, make sure she’s not wounded by enemies (no chance against Pyramid Head, though), check in on her when one has to leave her behind at Brookhaven Hospital, try to rescue her from the underground prison cell in the Historical Society etc. This will lead to James leaving town with Maria. However, what might look like a chance for a “happily ever after” and would undermine the logic of psychotherapy, is overshadowed by Maria’s coughing – which suggests that fantasy is about to dissolve and history is about to repeat itself. Coming to terms with one’s guilt requires acknowledgment of all the facts and facing the consequences. Clinging to a dream and fleeing into wishful thinking is not an option. All three endings are coherent with the metaphorical interpretation of the game and absolutely everything the player does contributes to the game’s story.

On the one hand I am very impressed by this narrative coherence and how the designers managed to achieve it. Normally, games try to bridge the gap between player and avatar by getting the player to role-play the avatar or by forcing the player to behave in a particular way so the player would enact an ideal story. *SH2* simply refuses to acknowledge that gap and thus maintains absolute narrative control. The game system boldly assumes that all the player’s actions are expressions of James’ mental state. Thus, the player’s actions do not have to be
restricted or guided to realize an ideal story. She will do so in any case. The only problem is that the game’s story is not the player’s story, because it all happens without the player’s knowledge! Only in retrospect does it make sense and one becomes able to interpret one’s own actions in the light of the game’s final reading. Only after the game is over can the player look back on her experience and realize, “oh, I guess when I was stuck and tried to ask Maria what to do, it actually meant I / James wanted to flirt with her!”

Despite the cleverness of the trick, it was still a trick and I felt tricked by it. The forced identification between me and James by the game’s system made me feel like a pawn, like my intentions as a player didn’t count – which is probably the exact opposite of the effect the designers wanted to achieve. The knife I got from Angela was just another object for me, no different than any other thing I put in my inventory and examined. The same goes for the suicide journal. How was I to know that the game’s system would interpret my interest for these notes as James’ more or less subconscious wish to die? To figure out what to do next, you have to read the memos and journals. That my actions represented something else than mere player curiosity or effort to win the game made me feel like the game controlled me, not the other way round.

Ideally, a game would manage to align the player’s and avatar’s goals in such a way that the gap between them is naturally minimized. If that’s not the case, I prefer being steered and being made aware of it over having an illusion of freedom and learning in the end that my actions have been stripped of my intentionality and somebody else’s has been assigned instead. That’s cheating!

III. Conclusion

*SH2* is a rare example of an emotionally rich, multi-layered and highly symbolical video game. One can play and enjoy this game, but never uncover its deeper meaning. For me, playing it well means going beneath the surface. In this paper I illustrated with many examples how reading *SH2* as a metaphor for a psychotherapeutic process can explain much of its strangeness and make it intelligible in retrospect. Essentially, I argued that therapy can be understood in terms of a journey with the obstacles on the way – be they mere roadblocks, lock and key puzzles, or monsters – representing mental or emotional blockades that have to be overcome in order to find the source of the trauma. I suggested that the town Silent Hill is an objectively existing place that in some sense represents the mind, which is subjectively shaped by the things people have “on their minds” and project onto that space. As many
questions as this hypothesis answers it does not explain why the mind should be a small American town that at the time has magically attracted three people who all have killed somebody. But it’s exactly this interpretative richness that is one of *SH2*’s main attractions. One can play it over and over again and always discover new details (e.g. did that corpse I saw in the street look like James? Why did Mary’s letter suddenly go blank?) that give rise to new speculations and readings. I’ve never played a game before whose replayability value hinged so much on its narrative component.

The strength of its story, however, is also its most problematic aspect. *SH2* is so focused on the creation of a seamless and coherent narrative and an absolute matching of game and story that it uses the player as a pawn to enact that story and determine its outcome. By simply insinuating total identification of player and avatar, everything the player does is read as an expression of James’ mental state. Of course, this is not the case since the player is still primarily playing a game and her goals and motivations are thus largely different from James’s goals and motivations. To realize that one’s actions have been read in a specific way without communicating this interpretation to the player during gameplay and making the player aware of it, makes one feel cheated.

All in all, and to stay in the jargon of psychotherapy, I consider *SH2* a major breakthrough in the history of videogames.

**References**

