

## MULTI-MEDIA REVIEWS

### *Silent Hill: Shattered Memories*

Developer: Climax Group, Publisher: Konami Digital Entertainment

Platform: Nintendo Wii

[Please note, this review contains spoilers!]

*Silent Hill: Shattered Memories* is the most recent instalment in Konami's survival horror series. Centred in and around the lakeside resort town of the same name, each game reveals more about the place's sinister history, while uncovering the tortured past of various characters unlucky enough to find themselves within its streets.

Memory – and its unreliability – constitutes a recurring theme of *Silent Hill*, and as the title implies, the preoccupation is central to this episode. Ostensibly a remake of the first game, in which Harry Mason searched the town for his missing daughter Cheryl, the franchise's seventh instalment contains many elements familiar to players of the series. An ordinary protagonist finds himself trapped in the sinister location, armed only with a flashlight and a radio. Tasked with escaping alive, players uncover more about their on-screen surrogate as they solve baroque puzzles, navigate maze-like buildings, and battle grotesque monsters. Previous *Silent Hill* characters have included a guilt-stricken wife murderer hiding from the knowledge of his crime, a teenager ignorant of her previous incarnation as a mystical child, and a truck driver repressing a childhood in which he witnessed his mother's insanity and his father's suicide. Progress through *Silent Hill* involves these characters' layers being slowly peeled away, revealing the truth about their past.

This latest offering develops other tropes of the series and elements of the survival horror genre. For example, self-conscious psychoanalytic dimensions are explicitly foregrounded in the game's framing. Each level requires players to perform tests for a cynical psychiatrist, such as answering personal questions, organising a school timetable, pairing married couples from a pile of photographs. Players' responses and further in-game choices influence the aesthetics of the digital experience, modifying character design, locations and conversations. The degree to which *Shattered Memories*, as the opening title suggests, 'plays you as much as you play it' is open to debate. The game has only a limited number of potential alternatives, and is unalterably centred on the actions of a white male heterosexual. This inflects upon the redrawing of the game world, much of which concerns the attire of female characters, something quite at odds with the game's final reveal – that the character answering the psychiatrist's questions and the one experiencing the horrors of Silent Hill are not the same.

But this may be missing the point of *Shattered Memories*, which is not to produce an authentic psychologically-tailored experience, but rather to present narrative, in the tradition of Gothic fiction, as a projection of the protagonist's possibly-deranged psyche. It certainly corresponds with previous instalments of *Silent Hill*, which frequently adopt a critical attitude towards their heroes' masculinity and sexuality, as they disintegrate under the burden of increasing self awareness.

Survival horror has traditionally sought to employ the modes and technologies of the videogame medium in delivering suspense and terror. *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* (2002, GameCube) had a 'sanity meter', inducing digital hallucinations if the gauge dropped too low, *Haunting Ground's* (2005, PS2)

panic mode temporarily removed player control during the most perilous situations, and *Forbidden Siren's* (2004, PS2) 'sight jacking' afforded the optical perspective of armed zombies. On the Nintendo Wii, *Shattered Memories* exploits the console's unique interface. The wiimote allows players to nod or shake in answer to questions, to rotate objects, and to interact with surroundings: sliding cupboard doors, pulling nails from a shut window, tipping tin cans. This provides the game world with a gritty physicality, and although the effect can occasionally feel contrived. The game ably integrates the Wii's peculiar interface into the hectic gameplay which characterises survival horror.

More integral is the remote's function as the flashlight which determines the direction in which Harry moves. Within the *Silent Hill* universe, at scripted points during play, the town transforms into a diabolical Otherworld. During these disturbing set pieces the game becomes purely action-driven as players hurtle through the environment, violently shaking the controller to fend off skinless creatures, while keeping sight of distant doors and ledges offering the means of escape. These sequences of arcade action feature no weapons, ammunition, health packs or puzzles to distract from the urgency of flight. Contrasting with its less integral application in the Wii version of *Resident Evil 4*, *Shattered Memories* employs the Nintendo control system to provide central elements of survival horror – flight and defencelessness – requiring players to frantically alternate between the controller as navigator and as imperfect means of defence.

Another component of the series, the crackling radio which indicates nearby monsters, is substituted by a somewhat incongruous smart phone. While this contemporary device initially seems out of place in the austere world of *Silent Hill*, the phone's operation suggests something spooky resides in even the most modern of technologies. Despite its North American location and Portsmouth-based developer, through this *Silent Hill* reveals its Japanese origins, echoing films like *Ring* (1998) and *One Missed Call* (2003), in reflecting a world in which spirits make themselves known through domestic media. Hotspots positioned throughout game locations cause the digital device to buzz and whine with distortion. These points trigger an ominous flash across the screen as voice messages appear on the phone, afterimages of past events imprinted by some supernatural presence. Listening to these recordings involves placing the remote to the ear like a telephone receiver, disturbingly disrupting the separation between the game world and the player's living room. The effect is genuinely eerie, providing a degree of tactility never afforded by previous games' console technologies, while the sound of digital interference proves as unsettling as the analogue crackling of previous *Silent Hill* episodes.

The ambiguity of the series is exemplified in the multiple versions of the game's narrative which players' actions generate, while the shattered memories of the title reference both the figure in the psychiatrists office, and the protagonist players control. Throughout the game, Harry forgets his daughters' age, his own address, the last few years of his life. As in previous *Silent Hill* games, the figure players are tasked with rescuing – be it a runaway child, a dead wife, or a missing brother – is less significant than the deeper psychological truths discovered along the way, often uncovering buried memories concerning the protagonist's true relationship with their missing loved ones. The twist to *Shattered Memories*, revealing that the psychiatrist's patient and the game protagonist are different people, suggests the 'memories' narrated in supposedly flashback sequences are more fiction than fact.

*Shattered Memories'* Otherworld crystallises such themes. A nightmare glacial dimension which invades the game environment like a sudden frost entombing everything and everyone in solid ice, this frozen world represents a metaphor for the patient's psychological state. This is a person petrified by their own false memories, unable to move on from traumatic experiences which may, ironically, be the product of a deranged imagination. Mementos, lost objects hidden throughout the environment, continue this motif: a

plastic doll in a freezer compartment, an insect embalmed in amber, undeveloped photographs; while the phone messages Harry receives express the Gothic concern with the past's inescapable influence.

If *Shattered Memories* represents a return to survival horror form, following the more action orientated *Silent Hill Homecoming*, it undeniably suffers from failings traditionally levelled at the genre. The game undoubtedly privileges visual complexity over interaction. Aesthetic details – bicycles in the playground of Midwich School, barrels piled outside Annie's Bar – are merely decoration, with limited opportunity for engagement.

Gameplay is remarkably linear and does not even pretend to offer multiple pathways, beyond the superficial impact of its crude psychological profiling. And the control system is clumsy and inaccurate. Nevertheless, such qualities are perversely prized as defining characteristics of survival horror, and *Silent Hill's* latest instalment constitutes a worthy addition to both genre and franchise.

***Ewan Kirkland***

*Silent Hill Shattered Memories*

Graphics: 7

Gameplay: 7

Sound: 8

Replay Value: 8

Overall Score: 8

*Alan Wake*

Developer: Rocksteady Studios, Publisher: Eidos Interactive

Platform: Xbox 360

Writers often have a hard time of it. It's an isolated career: with days, weeks, months and years spent locked away in a tiny room typing your life onto a page. So is it any wonder that sometimes, you just want to get away from it all?

Alan Wake is one such horror writer, with a lot in common with Stephen King. He's written best sellers, everyone knows who he is and the world is waiting with baited breath for his next novel. Only he's got writer's block. And has had for two years. His wife, Alice, concerned for his deteriorating mental condition (Alan can't write and can't sleep and when we first meet him he's a bit sulky...), takes him away to Bright Falls, an isolated mountain community where he can get some peace away from the horror that is the typewriter and an empty page.

After meeting a few locals, and a creepy incident in the local diner involving the local mad woman, Alan and Alice go their cabin deep in the mountains. This being a horror game, things deteriorate relatively fast. No, he doesn't get hit by a van whilst out for a walk, or mauled by a rabid golden retriever (admit it, we're all hoping it happens to Dean Koontz one day). Rather, it gets dark. Really dark. Which is bad for two main reasons. One: Your wife is terrified of the dark and becomes hysterical if the lights go out; and Two: The darkness is sentient and out to kill you. Admittedly, the second point is probably the more serious of the two.

After a fight with his wife, Alan storms out of the cabin only to find it soon engulfed by darkness and Alice's screams echoing in his ear. Wake's quest begins as he wakes up a week later to find Alice still missing and himself the prime suspect in her disappearance. Wake soon discovers that more is going on than meets the eye, as pages from a book he doesn't remember writing begin to appear, telling him exactly what's about to happen. The errant author soon finds himself chased by local law enforcement (with one brilliant chase scene involving police, rogue FBI agents and a helicopter chase in a moon lit forest) and possessed villagers as he tries to find Alice and discover what happened in the week he can't remember.

Throughout the game Wake is assailed by locals possessed by the darkness, resulting in a multitude of psychotic loggers, farmers and hunters rising out of the forest and attacking him. Wake also comes under attack from possessed objects, from dustbins to diggers.

The game is not limited to just running around a forest at night. A number of scenes take place around the town during the day, with Wake interacting with the locals and his agent and friend Barry, who acts as comic relief (and actually manages to be funny on occasion).

Combat involves a combination of flashlight and various firearms. The flashlight is used to eliminate a veil of darkness that hangs over the various possessed townsfolk you meet. Once this is removed, shown by a flash of light, they become vulnerable to gunfire. The flashlight also acts as your targeting reticule which is an interesting convention that, although slightly awkward to get used to initially, fits within the story and works well.

Interesting touches abound in *Alan Wake*, which is to be expected from a game that has been in development for so long. Throughout the game you can turn on radios and listen to a local DJ talk to locals and give out news stories which relate to the game itself. For example early in the game you're told to keep an eye out for a missing dog and the next day you meet his owner bandaging up the aforementioned hound's paw; the pooch having been attacked by something in the woods...

In terms of the technical achievements of the game, *Alan Wake* succeeds brilliantly. Visually the game is a marvel, the day time scenes of Bright Falls and the moments when you get to walk through the mountains and forests in daylight look amazing and you almost wish you could visit the place. At night, the forest crowds around you giving you a feeling of both claustrophobia and, strangely, space, as you can easily get lost in the woods. There is the occasional wall and the odd moment where you will have no idea where you are, however this doesn't get in the way of the game or its story. The sound and music for the game are also excellent, warning you of approaching enemies and carrying you along into the plot.

The game has a somewhat tongue in cheek attitude to the gameplay, with pages from the novel *Wake* wrote that he can't remember scattered throughout the game, warning you of events to come or happenings elsewhere in the game. Add to this the *Twilight Zone* style show that appears on television sets within the game (a show, written and filmed by the game designers, which you can watch from start to finish). Small touches like this help create a real world around you and encourage you to go back and find that extra page or coffee thermos you just can't locate.

*Alan Wake* is an excellent game. Not as traumatising in scare terms as mainstays such as *Resident Evil* and *Silent Hill* and at times it plays fairly tongue in cheek (the rock concert stage built on a farm by ex-rockers Odin and Thor is one of the stranger and more fun sequences in the game). There are moments throughout, however, when you will find the hairs on the back of your neck rising and your palms going sweaty as the wind starts to blow and the darkness creeps in all around.

### ***Eoin Murphy***

#### *Alan Wake*

Graphics: 9

Gameplay: 8

Sound: 8

Replay Value: 7

Overall Score: 8

***Pigeons from Hell***

(Publisher: Dark Horse Books)

Original Story: Robert E. Howard

Writer: Joe R. Lansdale Artist: Nathan Fox

The Southern States of the United States of America are a bastion of Gothic horror. Lonely bayous, slavery and abandoned homes of former stately families with a dark past, all forming a perfect backdrop from which to develop tales of things in the dark.

Robert E. Howard's classic tale of the Southern Gothic, *Pigeons from Hell*, first published in *Weird Tales*, May 1938, is one such example, the story firmly rooted in the sordid past of the USA's Deep South.

Howard's original story followed John Branner and his friend Griswell (but not for long...), who spend the night in an abandoned mansion. During the night, Branner awakes to find Griswell walking down a flight of stairs carrying the axe that had just cleaved his head in two. Suffice to say, the story takes off from there.

Joe R. Lansdale, the writer of the *Drive in Series*, *The Nightrunners* (1987) and innumerable other novels, has taken on the job of retelling (or indeed reimagining, to use that hateful term) the story, updating it for the modern world, with the tale now focusing on two sisters, Claire and Janet, who have inherited the abandoned Blassenville estate, left to them by their grandmother. It is quickly established (via a significant amount of exposition) that the sisters are the descendants of slaves who were once owned by the mansion's original occupants, but following an unnamed incident, which resulted in the end of the family line, the home becomes the property of the slaves (it's all very ironic...)

The sisters arrive at the dilapidated mansion just as the sun starts to set, a massive flock of pigeons taking flight as they pull up in a van, which is a tad reminiscent of the mystery machine. The sisters and a rag tag group of friends, who strongly resemble the Scooby Gang, proceed to explore the house, which is filled with the abandoned detritus of its former occupants.

One of the group, overexcited at the site of thousands of dead pigeons, breaks his leg and when the group attempt to get him to the hospital they crash the van in a bayou and become trapped in the house overnight, all the while commenting (over and over again) on how it's hot outside but cold inside – could there be something supernatural going on?

Soon after, but not soon enough for this reviewer, the group becomes embroiled in the horror that lives in the heart of the house, a mystery that leads back to its pre-Civil War roots, slavery and, of course, voodoo.

Although the story is based on the Robert E. Howard short story it loses a lot of the original story's impact, mostly as a result of additions by Lansdale. In the original story it was two friends, who, tired after a day's travelling, take shelter in the abandoned Blassenville mansion, only for its supernatural resident to attack.

Introducing a brand new cast of characters and making them descendants adds little to the story, other than forcing Lansdale to introduce a lot of exposition in the first ten pages, most of which was handled comfortably within the original tale but here comes across as little more than an information dump.

The large group of friends, who do little more than provide cannon fodder, draws away the intimacy of the original tale, with many of the characters purely superfluous to the story itself, other than to walk around carrying cell phones and commenting on how they cannot get a signal (which after a decade or more of this appearing in films is starting to becoming a cliché in itself. Just don't mention the phone!). The fact that these characters are drawn from a bad slasher film couldn't be more obvious than if two of them had wandered off from the group and had care-free teenage sex (which never ends well in these situations).

Two other characters from Howard's original make an appearance and, strangely, Lansdale has done nothing to update them. In the original a sheriff appears, having chased an escaped prisoner into the bayou on horseback. In the modern retelling, the sheriff arrives on horseback in the same manner, with similar dialogue, and just doesn't fit properly into the retelling. I found myself wondering why he was on horseback when most rural police seem to prefer 4x4's. Strangely, the sheriff's reaction to Branner's story in the original is a much more modern (and sensible one) compared to this retelling.

Lansdale has bulked up the story with the arrival of the Scooby Gang, the inclusion of a Haints (the ghosts of dead slaves) sub plot, a pointless leg breaking and car accident that only serves to drag out the story.

The updating of the story simply doesn't work, with the original tale much better at eliciting a reaction from the reader. Frankly, the graphic novel update is filled with annoying characters and it misses much of the import of the original tale.

Visually, the character drawings are surprisingly ugly, Claire and Janet coming off the worse. Their features regularly change so that at times you can't tell them apart and three panels later they look nothing like each other. The other characters are standard teen templates (see insert) but again are remarkably unappealing. Backgrounds are serviceable enough, but the gritty style of art again appears ugly and yes, a dilapidated mansion filled with dead pigeons won't be the prettiest of places, but I'd still like to be able to identify objects in the house rather than grey blue ill-defined debris.

Whilst I'm a fan of Joe R. Lansdale's other work, the adaptation of *Pigeons from Hell* just did not appeal to me. It carried none of the skill in storytelling that is present in Howard's original tale and the change from Branner to Claire and Janet just doesn't work, with exposition dumps early in the graphic novel which are clumsy and somewhat irritating to read. If you're interested in reading a good Southern Gothic tale, then please, look for a copy of Howard's original story, it has all the elements needed to make sure you never look at a pigeon in the same way again. Otherwise, avoid this graphic novel.

***Eoin Murphy***