

**Blooper Team SA, *Layers of Fear***

(Aspyr, 2016)  
(Reviewed on PC)

To discuss *Layers of Fear*, it is necessary to understand the success of the playable teaser of Hideo Kojima and Guillermo del Toro's *Silent Hills* (2014), as well as other recent games like *Resident Evil 7* (2017) and the upcoming *Visage*. The scenery of horror games has gone through a revival in the last few years, during which time games like *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* (2011) brought back some classical features of the survival-horror genre and used new strategies to enhance the suspense experience. The earliest horror games, in the 1980s, were bounded by the limited technology of the time; without advanced graphics, the game developers were inspired by horror fiction, and invested in investigative narratives, such as in *Haunted House* (1982) and *Alien* (1984). Those narratives could be accomplished digitally by employing text and symbolic signs associated with horror, such as ghosts and bats, and engaged the player in evasive actions (escaping traps and enemies) rather than confrontations. The games relied on the imaginative capacity of the players, and the illustrations in the game boxes were important to help contextualise the game's atmosphere.

In the 1990s, with better 3D graphics, game developers could finally produce an appealing visual scenery for games, which reinforced the immersion of the player. In this decade, games as *Alone in the Dark* (1992) and *Clock Tower* (1996) were released. Some important features from these games were the puzzle-solving, third-person camera with static placement, trapped characters, a menacing and haunted atmosphere, and inventory management. Many such games - including *Resident Evil* (1996) - also included armed combat. Building on this, from the middle of 2000s to the beginning of the 2010s, the horror genre in gaming distanced itself from its literary origins, and first-person shooters became popular, such as *F.E.A.R.* (2005) and *Dead Space* (2008). Even with an aesthetically ominous ambience, those games lacked suspense and investigation, however, leaning on jump scares, monsters, and violence. In response, games like *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* and *Outlast* (both 2013) brought back puzzle-solving and evasive actions to avoid combat, while redefining the first-person camera to a produce more emotive approach, in order to provoke fear, rather than simply act as a window for shooting.

Following this pattern, *Layers of Fear* is a new-generation horror game that dialogues with classic elements, such as the investigative narrative and the haunted house, while offering a

refreshing gaming experience through the possibilities opened up by interactive narrative, dynamic level design, and an excellently realised setting, accomplished through a mixture of Victorian decoration and psychedelic elements, such as spinning and endless rooms. The depiction of deteriorated environments where we can see the distortion and corruption that characterises the daily life of a monstrous reality is a classic feature of horror games, and one that is revisited in recent offerings. The player experiences this environment from a first-person perspective, from which they confront a threatening space, where the sensation of vulnerability is overwhelming. The most recent games mentioned above, with the exception of *Outlast*, all follow this pattern, and are also united by the environment in which they are set; in each of these games, the action happens in what is established as the player's home. The house, a supposedly safe space and a shelter for the individual, becomes instead a threatening one, from which the players need to escape.

In *Layers of Fear*, the player takes on the role of a tormented artist searching for a way to produce the perfect masterpiece. As in many ghost stories, such as Bram Stoker's 'The Judge's House' (1891) or Oscar Wilde's 'The Canterville Ghost' (1887), our journey takes place entirely within an elegant Victorian house, and the player is positioned as the Artist (our main character). The house is slowly twisted by fear, decay, and a menacing presence. It becomes clear, however, that this presence is not in fact supernatural, but a metaphor for the main character's soul. What is more, the game doesn't involve the player in scenarios in which they are chased; instead, we are presented with a series of forbidden rooms that the player needs to unlock in order to understand and help the protagonist. The transit through the house is the game's greatest appeal. As the name suggests, we pass through environmental layers that describe memories, entering deeper and deeper into the Artist's mind. These layers are represented through the house itself, which is full of images of his past and twisted by his interior ghosts and guilt.

The game constructs a dynamic environment through triggers and the first-person perspective; while walking through scenery, a player often wonders, 'was there a door here before?'. Memories can be tricky and the house hoodwinks us by transforming itself. In one of the game's most tense moments, the player is confronted with the ambiguous sentence – '[d]on't look back' – painted on a wall above the door, as the Artist walks through a long corridor. These mechanisms of employing non-static spaces serve the game well, masking the linear storytelling and causing discomfort and apprehension, key sensations to enhance the suspense. The dynamic

rooms prevent the player from moving too fast and losing track of the story, as it is needed to investigate the scenery, and, since the player never revisits exactly the same room, the experience of searching for information and items never becomes repetitive. Overall, the pacing is neither too quick nor too slow, keeping the player motivated, as well as offering a helpful number of breaks in different environments.

This game setting is quite similar to many classic works of gothic literature (and their cinema adaptations), such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Oval Portrait' (1842), and, more recently, Stephen King's *The Shining* (1980).<sup>1</sup> The similarity with the latter in terms of setting is noteworthy: the space of the Overlook Hotel in *The Shining* is subverted by the haunting visions of ghosts and the inhospitable climate, while in the game, the protagonist experiences hallucinations and must navigate the ever-changing scenery. An identical family structure also features in both texts: here, the father is also an artist suffering from a creative block, and is again accompanied by his wife and their child. However, it is useful to begin by analysing the artist-focused plot as presented in the game, before moving on to examine the family relationship. Literature and film have long been preoccupied with the tortured (male) artist's or genius's quest for perfection, often leading to the unravelling of his mind. There are many interpretations of this, as in the game *Alan Wake* (2010), along with movies like *Loving Vincent* (2017) and *The Imitation Game* (2015). In these stories, the creativity and highly developed intellect of the artist are accompanied by mental illness and suffering, which are often problematically glamorised in a way that implies that genius cannot exist without pain.<sup>2</sup> At first glance, *Layers of Fear* might also appear to trivialise the tortured-artist trope, but the game adds more complexity through ambiguity and through the relationships between the characters.

This complexity is aided by the fact that *Layers of Fear* is, besides a horror game, an exploration and discovery one. With an empty house and a silent protagonist, all narrative is constructed almost exclusively through interaction with the scenery, as well as newspapers, letters, and drawings. The game doesn't use cinematographic sequences; the player controls the camera and exploration, and is responsible for tying the story together. We don't know the

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<sup>1</sup> See Mateja Ilišin, *Gothic Elements in Stephen King's The Shining* (unpublished dissertation, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> This trope is also termed 'True Art is Angsty' by *TV Tropes*. See <<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/TrueArtIsAngsty>> [accessed 23 April 2018].

Artist's name; neither do we know when the story takes place. However, the game tells us who the protagonist is via its smallest details, such as the camera's tilt while the player walks – as if he is limping – and the dry beating noise of a cane, suggesting that the Artist has a physical disability. The constant sound of his steps is also reminiscent of a beating heart, a common trope in the horror genre. Many clues and scenery elements, some literal and others more subjective – like letters from the Artist's friends, an old school report, a broken phonograph, and baby shoes – lead us to believe that the protagonist has serious issues with his family, is an alcoholic, and is the victim of some sort of mental illness that causes hallucinations and paranoid behaviour. The environment provides additional clues that reveal his personality. Most of his drawings found during the game portray some of his obsessions, such as his drawings of rats, which emphasises his paranoia around pests. We can also infer that he has a physical disability by finding a cane tucked into a painting in the scenery, and also a diagram of a prosthetic leg. At his studio, where the game really begins, we discover his greatest desire, as we uncover a blank canvas and a message saying '[g]et it right this time': it is clear that the Artist is chasing perfection.

Conventionally, stories about artists undergoing mental suffering portray the suffering as fuel for creativity; here, however, the Artist's mental illness is actually a central reason for his failure. His wife is described as his muse and also a talented musician. When she suffers an accident and becomes disfigured, the Artist's obsession with perfection begins to wear upon their relationship, as we learn mostly from old newspapers that describe the accident, while the failure of their conjugal life is portrayed through the game's visual and textual narratives. The game itself can be understood as the retelling of their past, being constituted of fragments of their history, communicated to us in a variety of ways. It is hinted that, after the accident, he thought that he had lost his source of inspiration and couldn't paint beautifully anymore, which led to a series of rejections. His lack of productivity is connected to his hallucinations and obsessive behaviour, but it is not clear if the rejections triggered the manifestation of his mental illness or the contrary, the mental illness caused the artistic failure. Either way, he couldn't deal with it and blames his spouse for what is going wrong. The Artist is not a kind man; the game hints that, much like Jack Torrance, he blames his family for his lack of productivity and artistic failure. He can't accept himself and begins to mistreat his wife and child, while also projecting himself onto the child, forcing the infant to train for an artistic career. The main character, like in many gothic stories, is therefore also the villain, as in Poe's 'The Black Cat' (1843). There is subtle evidence

that he physically injured his child, and his ultimate sin was to urge his wife to commit suicide, which she does, as we see by the presentation of their bathroom with a bloody knife and flashes from his memory in which we see him being aggressive towards his wife. We access these memories through spoken lines, documentation, and ghostly phone calls suggesting that his wife wanted the divorce because of his violent behaviour.

The strained relationship between the characters is reinforced by the visual composition of the game, most evidently by the choice of paintings scattered around the rooms of the house. The paintings are all from different periods, varying from the beginning of fifteenth century, with the gothic painter Jan van Eyck, to the end of nineteenth century, with William Merritt Chase, and their themes are intimately linked to the story.<sup>3</sup> Most of the paintings are self-portraits and family paintings, though a few depict hell. The first category of painting we can associate with the Artist's ego, while the others speak directly of his family dynamics and mental health. His wife's suicide and losing custody of his child mark the downfall of the Artist. The opening of the game dramatises his attempt to atone by painting his *magnum opus*. In the process, the Artist almost becomes a sort of Dr Frankenstein in his insane and grotesque quest to bring his wife back to life through his art. In order to advance in the game, the player must gather bizarre items to complete his masterpiece, working in iteration loops through the house, loops that always culminate in the *atelier*. First, the player must collect a scrap of skin that serves as canvas; then, a vial of blood used as dye; a box of bones and a lock of hair that functions like a brush; a finger which is the 'final touch' to the piece; and finally, an eye, referred to as the 'audience', must be obtained before the player can finally complete the masterpiece and the game. The painting process is portrayed like the decomposition of a corpse, but at the same time, as the Artist paints, the picture becomes a rotten body being reconstructed. This freakish ritual gradually degrades the mansion, which becomes increasingly dirty and messy, and the rooms lose form to the point where the architecture becomes nonsense, as a reflection of the artist's mind. Subsequently, the last version of the house, with thick black paint on the walls, like tar, and even floating furniture, barely resembles the one in which the player begins the journey.

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<sup>3</sup> Most notable are Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434), Lavinia Fontana's *Portrait of Antonietta Gonzalez* (1595), Francisco de Goya's *Bandido asesinando a una mujer* (1800) and Augustus Leopold Egg's *Past and Present, No. 1* (1858).

Depending on how the player interacts with the house and the ghost of the Artist's wife (by confronting or avoiding her), they will be confronted with one of three finales, each with a distinct painting as the finished product. In the 'Neutral Ending', the Artist paints a portrait of his wife that quickly degenerates, and it is revealed that he has a room filled with similar paintings, indicating that he keeps painting in an eternal cycle. In the 'Selfish Ending', he paints a self-portrait that ends up in an art gallery; and in the 'Selfless Ending', he paints a portrait of his wife and child but burns it with the house, and the Artist throws himself into the fire.<sup>4</sup> Each ending represents a way of dealing with guilt, and comments on the Artist's character. It is noteworthy that the only ending where he doesn't either live in suffering or die is the one in which he is rewarded with success, but at the cost of his family's suffering (the Selfish Ending). All three endings are intriguing and compelling; however, when the player achieves one ending, he is encouraged by curiosity to become the Artist once again and to return to his studio and start the process all over again: the game is, in effect, an endless cycle. Here, we – the players – stand in the role of the lunatic Artist himself, in search of perfection. In the shoes of the Artist, we are pushed repeatedly towards madness, driven to forget the many hours already played, in the hope of a better resolution this time, either by trying to reach the other finales or by looking for hidden mementos. The game therefore can be seen as acting as a cathartic mechanism, but total abstinence is unreachable.

Even if presented initially as a straightforward tale about a mad artist, the game sustains itself well through careful manipulation of its game design, producing an admirably complex story. All of its elements merge perfectly into a puzzle constructed of storytelling and ambiance, making the setting an ideal one for suspense and horror. The overuse of jump scares can be repetitive and the lack of more challenging puzzles may not please everyone, but nevertheless, *Layers of Fear* offers a good gothic-horror story, with enjoyable gameplay for those willing to play it.

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<sup>4</sup> This terminology is used by the game community. See <[http://layersoffear.wikia.com/wiki/Layers\\_of\\_Fear\\_Wikia](http://layersoffear.wikia.com/wiki/Layers_of_Fear_Wikia)> [accessed 26 October 2018].