

THE FORECAST OF FILM NOIR: HEAVY RAIN IN THE NOIR MEDIASCAPE

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ABSTRACT

Heavy Rain is an interactive, narrative-driven video game rooted in the film noir genre. In this paper, I will analyze the ways in which film noir can be conveyed in other media using examples from *Heavy Rain*, and argue how video games as a medium are taking the noir mediascape in a new direction. *Heavy Rain* uses some of the major elements of film noir, including aesthetics in its visual style such as anti-traditional mise-en-scene and chiaroscuro lighting which ultimately serve to convey emotion, generate a melancholy tone, and invoke existential themes. Additionally, the adoption of multi-perspective narration and unreliable narrators adds to the complexity of the game's narrative structure, and emphasizes motifs often found in classic noir films. Overall, film noir sensibilities are intrinsic to *Heavy Rain*. Just as classic noir motion pictures went against traditional standards and changed the course of Hollywood filmmaking, *Heavy Rain* has altered the future of game making, demonstrating that video games hold the potential to convey deep, meaningful stories with complex narratives that echo those of classical noir films.

INTRODUCTION

"How far will you go to save someone you love?" – a question posed during the initial launch trailer of the video game *Heavy Rain* (2010). An inquiry that sets the tone for the story to come and echoes endlessly in the minds of viewers. Developed by Quantic Dream, *Heavy Rain* is an interactive drama and psychological thriller where every choice the player makes can alter the fabric of its narrative and be the difference between life and death for the characters. In a city plagued by constant rainfall, a serial killer dubbed the Origami Killer stalks the streets, kidnapping and drowning young boys four days after their abduction with rainwater. Through the eyes of four separate protagonists– Ethan Mars, Scott Shelby, Norman Jayden, and Madison Paige– the player must not only search for clues to uncover the killer's identity, but also race against time to find his latest victim before it is too late.

Described as an interactive movie rooted in the film noir genre, *Heavy Rain* calls back to a time of classic film noir through narrative, visual, and thematic motifs. These references are both overt and covert, with some being as simple as visual aesthetics, and others being more complex such as the use of origami figures. Game designer David Cage confirmed that the killer's affinity for leaving these figures on the victims was a nod to the end of famous neo-noir film *Blade Runner* (1982). The idea of classic film noir, however, is one that has proven to be rather perplexing. It has always been simpler to spot a noir film than it has been to generate a definition of what "noir" really means, which has led to a lot of uncertainty and debate around what constitutes film noir. In its simplest form, film noir can be described as a series– an ensemble of movies that bear strong enough similarity to one another in terms of subject matter, style, tone, and more, that, over time, they develop a distinctive character. In terms of that character, authors Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton (1955) concluded that "the moral ambivalence, the criminality, the complex contradictions in motives and events, all conspire to make the viewer co-experience the anguish and insecurity which are the true emotions of the contemporary *film noir*... The aim of *film noir* was to create a *specific alienation*" (p. 25). With this loose definition, film noir can be seen as a genre, a style, or a movement, that spans across numerous time periods and mediums.

The 'noir mediascape,' as film scholar James Naremore termed it, is a phenomenon in which classical film noir provide images, motifs, characters, and plots that can be alluded to in an array of

mediums. In the 21st century, the film noir phenomenon has the opportunity to reach even further than before, spreading into new mediums using modern technology. One of the more historically recent mediums that has been folded into the noir mediascape is the video game, whose form often lends itself to the narrative complexity of motion pictures but with an added element of interactivity. As will be discussed further, the video game *Heavy Rain* borrows greatly from the film noir tradition, even being described as “a very dark film noir” by David Cage, adding itself to the newest generation of noir. By analyzing a multitude of film noir components as they appear in *Heavy Rain* such as visual style, narrative structure, themes of violence and crime, as well as existential motifs, this paper will elucidate the ways in which noir can be conveyed in other media using examples from *Heavy Rain*, and argue how video games as a medium are taking the noir mediascape in a new direction.

DARKNESS, DOWNPOURS, AND DEATH

Heavy Rain opens with a peek in the life of the idyllic Mars family: Ethan, a successful architect and father; Grace, a loving mother and wife; and Jason and Shaun, two young, playful boys. In celebration of Jason’s birthday, the family makes a trip to the mall, where Ethan buys a bright red balloon for the boy. However, when he turns around, his oldest son is nowhere to be found and in a sequence that elicits the palpable panic of a parent who has lost their child, Ethan chases balloon after balloon until he finally finds Jason outside of the mall entrance. Here, the player’s control is revoked and all they can do is helplessly watch as Ethan jumps in front of a car, attempting to save his son, but to no avail.

Two years pass and the player finds themselves looking at the same Mars family, but this time they no longer paint the picture of a perfect family. Ethan, recovering from the accident and now divorced, picks up his surviving son from school and awkwardly tries to revitalize the bond between them. However, it does not take long until tragedy strikes the Mars family again. While at a park, Ethan experiences a blackout and awakens only to discover that hours have passed and Shaun is nowhere to be found. The Origami Killer has selected his next victim and thus the hunt begins.

The other playable characters are introduced through a variety of investigative scenes, where each is looking for Shaun through their own unique lens. Norman Jayden, an FBI profiler sent to assist the local police in their search for the Origami Killer, assesses the numerous crime scenes for evidence; Scott Shelby, a former police officer turned private investigator, follows local leads, and connects with previous victims’ families for clues; and Madison Paige, a young journalist, digging around to gather new information about the case. The player has alternating control over these characters, as well as Ethan Mars, with each chapter of the game swapping between their four perspectives. However, as mentioned previously, every decision made while playing can transform the overall plot, and consequently, the lives of these characters are in the player’s hands. Unlike most video games, *Heavy Rain* does not reset chapters or respawn characters if the player “fails” an in-game task or if any of the cast dies; the story simply goes on without them, ultimately changing the ending of its narrative. Due to this aspect, this paper will mainly focus on one of the game’s multiple endings– the “Perfect Ending” in which the protagonists survive, Shaun is saved, and justice is served to the Origami Killer.

THE NOIR CITY

Heavy Rain places the player on the streets of a nameless city in the United States– an environment that bears a strong resemblance to almost all noir films. In fact, urban America is quintessential to the classic film noir. The urban spaces in noir sensibility were often utilized to comment on social and economic matters of the time period, fabricate a sense of realism, and provide an apt backdrop for violent crime. One only needs to look at the titles of noir films to observe the significance of urban spaces: *Night and the City* (Jules Dassin, 1950), *Cry of the City* (Robert Siodmak, 1948), *The Asphalt Jungle* (John Huston, 1950), and *The Naked City* (Jules Dassin, 1948). In part, this obsession with cities was rooted in the desire to generate realism, credibility, and existentialism in cinema, particularly after the end of World War II. The era of classical film noir was born from war and post-war disillusionment, post-war realism, German influences, and the hard-boiled tradition. These social and environmental factors of the time held great influence over filmmakers as well as movie consumers, who felt as if films needed to be more realistic and darker; Motion pictures could no longer go back to the times of Hollywood fantasy.

Moreover, a major reason for the urban settings of film noirs was to emphasize the moral decline that was being felt in America at that time: economic crises, the dissolve of traditional family units, and distrust of the government. In film noir, the city represents an unlivable space where moral indecencies are bound to happen. It represents the industrial advancement of America, and the subsequent lower working-class that is trapped there as a slave to the overall machine. The city as a setting signal that there is no way out for these characters, their reality-turned-nightmare cannot be escaped. This idea is one that is never overtly stated in *Heavy Rain*, but one that cannot be ignored as the player walks the dark, wet streets alongside the protagonists.

To start, although the city in *Heavy Rain* is not a real-life city, according to David Cage, he and his development team were inspired by and based their model off the city of Philadelphia. As a French video game developer, the Quantic Dream team travelled to Philadelphia in search of a potential location for their upcoming project with the expectation of a bright and dreamy city like they had seen in the movies. However, when these Europeans arrived, they were met with the rather harsh reality of life in an American city. As David Cage reflected, "what we discovered in Philadelphia was beyond anything we could imagine. We saw despair. We saw violence. We saw fear. We saw poverty, in a way that no one in Europe could imagine takes place in the U.S." (Juster, 2010). Cage and his team recognized that there can be an inherent sadness in Philadelphia's streets, which they later employed during the creation of *Heavy Rain* by drawing on their own direct experiences. It is also interesting to note that, much like the creation of *Heavy Rain* by a European company, many classical film noirs were directed by European émigrés such as Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, and Edgar Ulmer whom were driving forces behind noir's dismal expressionistic style. In fact, Ulmer's film *Detour* (1945) depicted America as a wasteland of sorts, where he discovered that "the West- traditionally the land of opportunity in American mythology -is revealed to be, in truth, the land of shattered dreams" (Cantor, 2006, p. 141). This shared background of many film noir directors played into the portrayal of America in many ways, most notably being the omnipresent moods of disillusionment, disorientation, and despair.

Within the world of *Heavy Rain*, the city stalked by the Origami Killer is no exception to film noir's influence. The urban setting (see Figure 1) hosts an array of violence, criminal activity, and shady individuals, connecting this game closer to classic noir visually and thematically. First, this video game employs the noir tradition of a big city setting in order to emphasize the moral indecencies and dangers that lurk in every corner, particularly bringing attention to the Origami Killer's ability to commit his heinous crimes seemingly in plain sight. The backdrop throughout this game is practically identical to those of noir films, with the landscape mostly serving to create that specific noir ambiance; "The city in film noir is never merely neutral, never simply a shapeless background. In both studio and location thrillers, it participates in the action, 'comments' on the characters, supplies mood and tension" (Hirsch, 1981, p. 79). This is particularly true throughout *Heavy Rain*, as the city itself is never a part of the plot; its purpose is to be an instrument for conveying tone, as well as produce the feeling of being trapped. Additionally, *Heavy Rain* takes the player into a suburban environment, which tend to be portrayed as "safe havens" from the urban insecurity, however, in this case these spaces are just as uncertain. Noir tones seep into the suburbs where Ethan resides (see Figure 1), visually depicting the despair in his life, his feelings of entrapment and hopelessness, as well as his inability to escape his living nightmare. Additionally, their depiction of the city addressed the United States' failings much like movies from the classical film noir era did.

In the case of Quantic Dream's game, the city can also be connected to classic film noir through its expressionistic portrayal. For



Figure 1 | Urban and suburban setting depictions from the opening credits sequence. Pictures from *Heavy Rain*.

example, the noir city has been described as “an existential site of alienation” (Mayer & McDonnell, 2007, p. 49). In these settings, people scurry along the gloomy streets and sit in their homes afraid of the dangers outside and suffering from their loneliness. Within *Heavy Rain*, the player sees the fear the general population is feeling with the Origami Killer on the loose, and above all, the player observes and, to an extent experiences, Ethan’s solitude. After Jason’s death and his divorce, Ethan is shown living in a dark, run-down home; a stark contrast to the brightly-lit, colorful home presented at the beginning of the game. The significance of this shift is not only on a visual level. Once Ethan’s life is flipped upside-down, he is thrown into a state of depression, confusion, and alienation; all of which are reflected in the oppressive, isolating nature of his physical environment.

NARRATIVE LABYRINTHS

Another distinctive feature of film noir is the way in which directors constructed their stories and how those narratives were executed. In order to add to the overall themes and messages of these classic motion pictures, directors from the 1940s and 1950s utilized peculiar narrative motifs such as fragmented storylines, flashbacks, and voiceover narration all with one main goal in mind: to instill suspicion in and disorient the viewer. The hard-boiled crime novels, and subsequently the classic noirs that were based upon them, aim to establish specific moods for their audiences to experience—disillusionment, paranoia, suspense, and dread—by which are created through a variety of means. In this section, the ways in which these tones are created via narrative structure will be explored, looking at both examples from the classical noir era as well as *Heavy Rain*.

The flashback motif is a staple of film noir; From the confessional flashbacks as seen in *Double Indemnity* (Wilder, 1944) where protagonist Walter Neff retells the story of how he committed murder through a recording admitting to his crime, to the investigative flashbacks which force the audience to look for and decipher clues throughout the past investigation, as seen in *The Killers* (Siodmak, 1946). By implementing flashback sequences or presenting the entire film as a flashback, directors can tell their stories as a subjective memory or demonstrate how the narrative is being told from each characters’ point-of-view. Though the flashback is not the dominant narrative structure technique in *Heavy Rain*, it still serves to emphasize specific plot points, dramatize certain emotions, and accentuate the mystery aspect of the game—the search for answers to the elusive truth using subjective perspectives.

In an investigative flashback that reveals the major plot twist of the game, the identity of the Origami Killer, the player is finally provided with backstory and clues about the killer’s motives. In this sequence, it is unveiled that one of the playable characters has been the culprit all along—Scott Shelby, using his private investigator status to evade suspicion, is the man behind it all. The player is told this through a flashback of Shelby as a child trying to save his twin brother from drowning in a pipe of a construction zone. The young boy attempts to free his brother but to no avail, so he runs to his father, an abusive drunk with no interest in boys whatsoever, to plead for his help. After being told off by the man, Shelby returns to his brother helplessly and is forced to watch him die; From this tragic event, the private investigator made it his life’s mission to find a father who is willing to give up their own life for their son’s, and thus the Origami Killer was born. This flashback not only exposes the identity of the killer and key information about his past, it also makes the player feel a sense of sympathy for him. This idea of having compassion for someone who has committed heinous acts, as observed in *Heavy Rain*, is one that is evident in film noir—particularly with the introduction of the anti-hero and other morally ambiguous archetypes which will be delved into deeper later in this paper.

Immediately following the memory of his childhood, the player plays as Shelby, alone in his dark office, as he burns items from his investigation in a trash can. After he throws each item into the flames, a short flashback of prior game scenes that correlate to the object plays. These quick flashbacks provide insight into how he committed certain murders, but they also exhibit moments of great humanity he has shown throughout the story. The contrast between Shelby’s good and bad deeds are indicative of his character, and the conflicted feelings the player has towards him reflect the way audiences are made to feel about film noir characters.

The complicated manipulation of time in film noir is often employed to confuse the viewer, demanding that they go through the labyrinth that is the plot line. It is understood that “other recurrent

aspects of *noir* narrative style– the fractured time scheme, the shifting points of view, the maze-like storyline– are distancing devices which enclose the characters within the frame, and thereby underscore the genre’s interest in alienation and entrapment” (Hirsch, 1981, p. 78). In the case of *Heavy Rain*, the use of an alternating narration between the four main protagonists provides the foundation for their narrative labyrinth to be built, and ultimately generate the claustrophobic feeling that is pervasive in the film noir tradition. This game organizes its rather conventional chronological storyline in a complex manner by rotating the narrative point-of-view between the four main characters, with each chapter of the game shifting from one perspective to the next. Ultimately, this complicates the mystery of the game and presents each narrator with an air of unreliability– How can the player know who is telling the truth, and who can they really trust? This is particularly evident with Shelby being a main narrator of the game. The player sees the story from his point-of-view, they trust and possibly even like him, yet he is revealed to be the central villain by the end. Therefore, the player has no choice but to question the reliability of each protagonist.

In addition to Shelby’s untrustworthy perspective, *Heavy Rain* implements yet another narrative device to complicate the plot: Amnesia. Though Ethan does not suffer from severe amnesia, throughout the game he periodically experiences unexplainable blackouts in which he wakes up hours later in a completely different location. It is during one of these blackouts when Shaun is kidnapped, presumably by the Origami Killer, and when Ethan returns to consciousness, he is found holding an origami figure in his hand. Due to this, Ethan starts to wonder and ultimately believe that he is the Origami Killer, and when the police eventually discover his possession of the origami figure, he becomes their prime suspect as well. As Nixon and Bizzocchi (2013) commented, “while Ethan chased after Jason in a scene that mirrors the opening chapter, we felt the depth of his longing and loss. This shaky mental state ties into the overall narrative and as a result of his occasional blackouts (one leads to Shaun being kidnapped in the first place), Ethan comes to believe he is somehow the Origami Killer, a red herring that helps to complicate the player’s understanding of the character and their actual control over him” (p. 11). This theme of false accusation and self-doubt is one that can be found throughout countless film noirs such as *Stranger on the Third Floor* (Ingster, 1940), *Detour*, *The Guilty* (Reinhardt, 1947), and *The Clouded Yellow* (Thomas, 1951), where “through expressionistic nightmares and hallucinatory flashbacks, we see amnesiacs trapped in the terror of believing themselves guilty of murder” (Dickos, 2002, p. 184). Not only do these dark narratives aim to complicate the mystery element of the plot by including faulty allegations and a character’s distrust in themselves, they also achieve a deeper level of characterization by inferring, or outright stating, that the protagonist believes that they are capable of committing these nefarious acts.

Lastly, *Heavy Rain*’s ending reflects those of classic film noirs that were impacted by the 1930 Production Code’s strict regulations on film content. As mentioned before, this paper will focus solely on the game’s “Perfect Ending,” in which all the characters live, Shaun is rescued, and the Origami Killer is brought down, even though there are multiple ways this story can end. The reason for the concentration on this specific ending is due to its undeniable resemblance to noir films under the Production Code. This set of self-censorship guidelines prevented filmmakers from allowing the criminals in their movies to get away with their crimes, therefore, classical film noir was full of “happy endings” where justice is served to the wrongdoers via either law enforcement or death. This phenomenon can be seen in films such as *Detour*, *Double Indemnity*, *A Touch of Evil*, *Out of the Past*, and *Gun Crazy* (Lewis, 1950). Although *Heavy Rain* was not affected by the Production Code, this aspect of the film noir narrative still made its way into the video game in its “Perfect Ending.” Other than the fact that no characters die throughout the storyline, the “Perfect Ending” concludes with Shelby meeting his demise– which some would describe as the ultimate form of justice. Parallel to the noirs of the past, the Origami Killer cannot escape his crimes and ultimately pays the greatest price for his actions.

OPPOSING THE LIGHT AND EMBRACING THE DARK

Though film noir comprises of a very diverse set of movies, there is one consistent thread that ties each of them into one unified phenomenon: lighting style. Lone desk lamps, neon lights, stark shadows, and dull streets are all permanently coupled with the film noir tradition, as this iconography is likely noir’s most

well-known and notable feature. Although these elements may seem to be purely aesthetic on the surface, they all serve a much deeper purpose.

First, many of noir's visual elements aim to express the fatalist and existential themes that gained prominence in post-World War II America. As mentioned previously, the dirty and dark city streets were one way that directors represented the American psyche into a visual form. This antitraditional lighting style creates a world that is unstable through unnerving compositions as well as framing devices such as doors, stairways, and windows, often conveying a claustrophobic feeling that both the audience and the characters seem to experience. In a classic noir film this often takes the form of shadows, which regularly cut through the picture, creating visual and metaphorical prison bars over the protagonist's face, or ones that envelop the edges or a portion of the screen that seems to close the characters into a small space of the frame. Quantic Dream implemented these tactics in their game as well, uniting it will the noir tradition further- utilizing the iconic chiaroscuro lighting and venetian blinds setup to deliver images that could be straight out of a noir movie (see Figure 2.1). When protagonist Madison Paige visits the mother of the Origami Killer and his twin brother, the player is delivered stunning noir-esque imagery of oblique lines slicing across the



Figure 2.1 | Madison Paige visits Ann Sheppard in a Geriatric Ward. Pictures from *Heavy Rain*.

old woman's face from the closed blinds of her room. In this scene, these metaphorical "bars" represent a multitude of themes: they serve to keep the player on edge, they indicate how the old woman is stuck living out the rest of her days in the Geriatric Ward, and most importantly, they illustrate how she is trapped by her own mind as she suffers from severe Alzheimer's. These shadows can express so much about the story and the emotions of the characters without having to deliver lines of dialogue, which is why these techniques were so powerful when utilized in the classical film noir era and continue to be as they expand throughout the noir mediascape.

Second, film noir is known for its dimly lit shots, dark color palettes, and low-key lighting to create stark shadows to obscure characters' faces and create a setting "where exterior scenes have a harsh, raw quality, gray and subdued" (Spicer, 2010, p. 314). This antitraditional form of lighting is a direct contrast from the Hollywood high-key lighting that dominated the early 1940s- a setup in which the fill light was strong enough to soften the rigid shadows created by the key light, producing a diffused and conventionally "attractive" look on the actors. Not only does low-key lighting produce artistic and intriguing imagery, it also acts as a rejection of this traditional Hollywood film style and provides commentary on the film industry.

One of the main effects of film noir lighting is its power to transform the meaning and mood of a scene. For example, in the classic film *Mildred Pierce* (Curtiz, 1945) the audience watches as Mildred emerges from the shadows, catching her husband having an affair with her daughter. The strong use of shadows in this scene effectively covers the characters' faces and hides their emotions and intentions. The husband and daughter begin the scene in shadow as well, which can represent their moral wrongdoing, and when they finally enter the light, their identities are revealed to both Mildred and the audience, eliciting intense tension. Much like *Mildred Pierce* and many film noirs like it, *Heavy Rain* applies low-key lighting in a variety of ways, all of which serve to immerse the player into the game and provide subtle details about each character. Throughout the entire game, the brightness levels seem to be set to the lowest setting, however, this is done on purpose as a stylistic choice. In conjunction with noir visual style, *Heavy Rain* creates dark, gloomy scenes (see Figure 2.2) in which what little light is present appears as if it

is about to be overcome by the darkness threatening it from all sides. In fact, Janey Place and Lowell Peterson (1974) state that, “above all, it is the constant opposition of areas of light and dark that characterizes *film noir* cinematography” (p. 67). This opposition mentioned is at the core of film noir tradition, and can very clearly be seen being utilized in the *Heavy Rain* video game.



Figure 2.2 | Extremely dark scene, using low-key lighting to obscure the character's face. Pictures from *Heavy Rain*.



Figure 2.3 | Scott Shelby entering the home of Charles Kramer before shooting multiple people. Pictures from *Heavy Rain*.

In addition, the game uses low-key lighting strategies to their advantage in order to reveal important information about certain characters, show the truth of their intentions, and visually signify when a protagonist is acting within a morally-gray area. The character Scott Shelby, goes on a murderous rampage during the game, entering the home of a man believed to have ties to the Origami Killer and shooting all of his security guards. At the start of this sequence (see Figure 2.3), Scott exits his vehicle, gun drawn, and his face mostly concealed in shadow. This use of low-key lighting conveys the immorality of the acts Shelby is about to commit as well as puts the player on edge for what is about to come. These are just some examples of how *Heavy Rain's* visual style was influenced by noir lighting; However, the entire game is dripping in noir aesthetics, especially when it comes to contrasts between darkness and light.

SEEING THROUGH THEIR EYES

A key element to any classic noir film is mental instability and the inclusion of visual representations of characters' psychological states. As detailed in the previous section, the most prominent representation of psychological well-being in film noir comes from its unique lighting techniques as well as its emphasis on and exaggeration of shadows. This technique stems from the psychoanalytic theory, a concept that preoccupied much of the American population during and after World War II, in which Dr. Carl Jung highlighted the theme of “the shadow.” In this psychological theory, “the *shadow*... cast by the conscious mind of the individual contains the hidden, repressed, and unfavorable (nefarious) aspects of the personality” (Williams & Arieux, 2013, p. 47). Instances of this portrayal can be found in classic noir films such as *Mildred Pierce* and *The Stranger* (Welles, 1946), as well as depictions of a “shadow self” or one's dual nature using reflections and mirror imagery as seen in *The Lady from Shanghai* (Welles, 1947), and *M* (Lang, 1931). Furthermore, the iconography of noir sometimes consists of carnivals or fairgrounds, which have their roots in German expressionism as a representation of insanity, to illustrate the psychological decline of noir characters. An example of this concept can be observed clearly in *Strangers on a Train*, as most of the murderous activity take place in a small amusement park and the final fight between Guy Haines and the psychotic Bruno Antony occurs on a moving carousel. Interestingly, this symbolism finds its way into *Heavy Rain* as Shaun is last seen on a park carousel before his abduction, and this location also marks when Ethan experiences his first blackout. Although this use of a carnival ride is not an integral part of the game's plot, it is still a striking nod to the genre's creative background.

The realm of video games is much like that of motion pictures, in which the internal emotions and states of the characters need a way to be expressed externally for the audience to follow along and empathize. *Heavy Rain* achieves this through a variety of methods but since the game “incorporates what Elsaesser calls ‘productive pathologies’ (Elsaesser 2009, 24) in its character design, this ability to highlight

mental states is vital. The protagonists frequently experience altered mental states: Paige suffers from insomnia, Shelby is an alcoholic schizophrenic, Jayden is addicted to a drug that facilitates his high-tech augmented reality glasses, and Ethan suffers from morbid neuroses” (Nixon & Bizzocchi, 2013, p. 11). *Heavy Rain* was not one to shy away from the discussion of mental illness, in fact, Quantic Dream made this topic one of the main subjects of their story– delving into the struggles of mental instability and how it can affect individuals inwardly and outwardly.

This interactive thriller employed a visual device that perfectly encapsulates its characters’ psychological state: “interaction-images.” These images function to establish an overall connection between the character and the player by letting them physically see into the minds of the protagonists. The effect used in *Heavy Rain* visually capture the character’s emotional and physical well-being, and effectively replicate that feeling to the player (see Figures 3.1 and 3.2). In critical, stressful events during the game, oftentimes the characters’ dialogue options will orbit their head faster, the words will fade in and out, and the choices will shake. All these effects make it not only more difficult for the player to read their choices, but it also instills that feeling of panic in them that the character is experiencing as they try to decide their next move. As Nixon and Bizzocchi (2013) assert, “the



Figure 3.1 | Norman Jayden talking down a suspect. Picture from *Heavy Rain*.



Figure 3.2 | Ethan contemplates killing a drug dealer to save his son. Picture from *Heavy Rain*.

diegetic nature of these interaction-images produces a strong connection between character and player action” (p. 3). As seen in Figure 3.1, FBI agent Norman confronts an armed suspect during his investigation. Throughout this sequence, the player is provided multiple dialogue options to select from in order to try to deescalate the situation, however, these dialogue prompts circle Norman’s body rapidly as they continuously fade in and out of view. This interaction-image illustrates the intensity of the situation, as well as the officer’s increased stress, to the player and adds significantly to the player’s own experience of those emotions. Similarly, in the scene in which Ethan is ordered to killed a man to receive more information about Shaun’s whereabouts (see Figure 3.2), the player is presented with shaky thought choices and action controls to

represent Ethan’s own apprehension to committing such a heinous act. The inclusion of these elements is one of the reasons why *Heavy Rain* is such an emotionally impactful game and why its story sticks with its players long after they have finished the game. Much like film noir, these interaction images provide a connection between the character and the viewer, immersing the audience within the plot, creating a multi-dimensional feel of the fabricated world, and above all instilling intense emotions in the viewer that drive home the major noir themes of darkness, gloom, and existentialism.

CORRUPTION OF THE TRADITIONAL HERO

The pervasiveness of existential thought in film noir is well documented in academic literature; particularly the influence this philosophy has on the characters inhabiting these dark worlds. Some of the prominent character types in the noir tradition are: the anti-hero or the non-heroic hero, the private eye, and the femme fatale. In general, the main protagonist is depicted as a man who is devoid of a typical heroic moral framework, he is haunted by his past and a victim of the corrupt world he lives in. This archetype of disillusioned, cynical, and anti-social protagonists can be found in most noir films, from Samuel Spade in *The Maltese Falcon* (Huston, 1941), to Jeff Bailey in *Out of the Past* (Tourneur, 1947), to Philip Marlowe in *Murder, My Sweet* (Dmytryk, 1944).

Specifically in *Heavy Rain*, Ethan Mars serves as the perfect example of a non-heroic hero: He is constantly struggling with the guilt and grief from his past, his identity as a “good” father is misplaced,

and overall, he must make morally wrong choices throughout the game to save his son. A main aspect of Ethan's character that ties him to the traditional noir hero is the fatalistic perspective he provides to the game. Towards the beginning of the story, the player must guide Ethan as he takes care of Shaun, however, no matter how well the player performs these tasks, the outcome is always the same: Ethan still fails to restore happiness in his family and his status as a "good" father is yet to be recovered. This idea that the future is predetermined and therefore inevitable is one that is prevalent in classical film noir. Additionally, Mars must make multiple decisions throughout the narrative that pressure the player to question his morality, yet another important aspect of the typical noir hero. For example, in the trial dissected previously where the Origami Killer demands Ethan to murder a local drug dealer in order to receive the next clue about his son's location, Ethan must negotiate his own morality and decide how far he is willing to go to save Shaun. This type of moral bargaining introduced since the introduction of *Heavy Rain*- "How far will you go to save someone you love?" - is one that gained prominence during the classic film noir era, with the rise of existential themes and moral ambiguity in cinema.

On the topic of moral ambiguity, it is paramount to understand the importance this element holds throughout the film noir tradition. As scholar Jason Holt (2007) puts it, "what most clearly distinguishes noir from, say, the more conventional thriller or gangster film is the lack of clarity with which moral distinctions are drawn" (p. 24). Looking at noir media in a purely visual sense disregards possibly the most crucial piece of noir sensibility: the philosophical and moral questions it poses. As mentioned previously, film noir was born out of post-World War II disillusionment and existentialism, thus these movies garnered themes of moral ambiguity and violence to express the frustration and defeat they were feeling. In *Heavy Rain*'s case, one character defines the morally ambiguous character type as well as the private eye archetype thoroughly: Scott Shelby.

After it is revealed that the Origami Killer's identity is Shelby, the player can feel betrayed, upset, or even angry. These feelings all arise from Quantic Dream's ability to make Shelby such a loveable, and seemingly morally just, character. "While some noir characters are unquestionably evil, many have their evil somehow attenuated (e.g., by a sympathetic motive or by being fully revealed as such only at the end)" (Holt, 2007, p. 24). This idea is especially true when examined against *Heavy Rain*. Scott Shelby is portrayed in a positive light for almost the entirety of the game, from his private investigative work, to saving a prostitute from an abusive client, to helping a suicidal woman take care of her infant daughter; Yet, by the end of the story, it is uncovered that he was the serial killer all along. Much like Holt (2007) stated, Shelby's evil is diluted with both the inclusion of a sympathetic motive for his crimes, and the fact that he is only revealed to be the villain at the very end of the game. Providing the player with Shelby's backstory of his abusive father and the way his twin brother died, as well as keeping his identity a secret until the end, are key ways in which Quantic Dream was able to create such a multi-faceted, believable character. Additionally, the moral ambiguity demonstrated by Shelby's actions further solidifies the realism of *Heavy Rain*'s narrative, much like it did in noir motion pictures. Realism is constructed in this manner because "people we encounter in our day-to-day lives are often of morally indeterminate status, either because we have no relevant information about them, or because we have conflicting evidence. To disambiguate, we often rely on moral tests, observing how people behave when it really counts (i.e., when the chips are down). But, even then, results can be inconclusive" (Holt, 2007, pp. 30-31). This desire to determine whether someone is morally "good" or "bad" is an innate aspect of realism; It forces the audience to reflect on themselves and the world around them, questioning what is "right" and what is "wrong." Scott Shelby in *Heavy Rain* represents this questioning for he performs in a morally correct manner, yet shows that it is still impossible to tell one's true intentions.

Another major theme in film noir characterization is the corruption of the police and the justice system as a whole. "The film noir, in contrast, contests official Hollywood morality not only by telling the story from the criminals' viewpoint (and thus naturally building sympathy for them) but also by representing the police, or 'legitimate' society, as inherently corrupt, no better, morally speaking, than the criminals who oppose them" (Palmer, 1994, p. 18). As discussed prior, Shelby's role as the villain is attenuated by his part as a main protagonist, building compassion and a connection with him as the

player sees the story through his eyes. On the other hand, *Heavy Rain's* portrayal of the police force throughout the story is undeniably noir.

In the film noir tradition, law enforcement is depicted as corrupt, immoral, and rotten— always willing to accuse an innocent person for the sake of ease, and in some cases even planting evidence to convict them (as seen in *Touch of Evil* (Welles, 1958)). This representation of the law is a product of the social and historical context of the classical era of film noir, where there was a lot of distrust in the government and the justice system. Within *Heavy Rain*, it is clear that the police are not supposed to be viewed in a particularly positive light by the player: the officers are quick to blame Ethan and pursue him as their prime suspect despite having little concrete evidence, and the introduction of police Lieutenant Blake, who acts as Norman Jayden's partner and deuteragonist. Blake is a prime example of noir's theme of police corruption in *Heavy Rain* because he takes on the role of "bad cop," being the aggressor in every interaction and interrogation presented. Much like Sergeant Mark Dixon in *Where the Sidewalk Ends* (Preminger, 1950), and Hank Quinlan from *Touch of Evil*, Lieutenant Blake is overly violent, abrasive, and in many ways, evil, supplying yet another thread that ties this video game back to the film noir tradition.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Heavy Rain stands at the beginning of a new era for the noir mediascape—An era that allows this older noir style to be a meaningful part of a new form such as video games. The influence of film noir on *Heavy Rain* appears in a variety of ways including the visual style, narrative complexity, and themes of existentialism, moral ambiguity, and crime. With the thorough analysis of these film noir motifs as they are presented in *Heavy Rain*, this paper revealed the ways in which the noir mediascape is continuing to expand and evolve in modern times, and the means by which the film noir tradition can be expressed in various mediums. As discussed previously, *Heavy Rain* employs some of the major elements of noir aesthetics in its visual style including chiaroscuro lighting and anti-traditional mise en scene which ultimately serve to convey emotion, generate a melancholy tone, and invoke existential themes. Additionally, the adoption of multi-perspective narration as well as unreliable narrators added to the complexity of the game's narrative structure. Having the story shift between the points-of-view of four separate protagonists convoluted the plot further, preventing the player from uncovering the full truth of the mystery and emphasizing the moral ambiguity of each character, specifically Scott Shelby. Overall, film noir sensibilities are intrinsic to *Heavy Rain's* storytelling, aesthetic, and theme. Just as classic noir motion pictures went against traditional standards and changed the course of Hollywood filmmaking, *Heavy Rain* has altered the future of game making, demonstrating that video games hold the potential to convey deep, meaningful stories with complex narratives and emotions.

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