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Game Analysis

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You are *Observing* the Be*witching* Analysis of the *Layers* of Bloober Team

Bloober Team is a small independent game developer based in Krakow Poland. They have really made a name for themselves in the psychological horror genre of video games, though they didn't start that way. Bloober team used to be part of Nibris Games that was founded in 2006. Bloober Team became independent thanks to investor funding and launched November 2008. Their first game was a strategy game called *History Egypt Engineering an Empire* released in 2010. They developed games all over the place genre-wise. Their first games ranged from strategy games to music to simulation to puzzle and they even dabbled in multiplayer online battle area games. A turning point came when they released *Basement Crawl* and promptly got criticism on every aspect of it. Instead of calling it quits on the project and perhaps their company at the same time, they went back and reworked the game completely. The only thing left unchanged in the rebuild was the core game concept. It was re-released under the name *Brawl* in 2015. After Brawl, they jumped into psychological horror and that is where they have stayed since and have released 5 games in this genre. "We realized in 2014 that we worked mostly on titles that were trying to catch other people and other teams that were successful," Babieno, a cofounder says. "So we tried to do something we personally would be proud of. I decided we should focus on the genre that would be very close to our [tastes]."

Layers of Fear entered the scene as Bloober Team's breakthrough into the psychological horror game scene in 2016. It explores the intricacies of human experiences when it comes to how one experiences madness. Bloober Team was heavily inspired by architecture and decor from the 19th centuries as well as paintings from different centuries. Layers of Fear is a first player game that follows an artist slowly going more insane as you explore the house and your art studio. Each venture into the house from the art studio ends in bringing back an element you need to finish your painting. Elements include a vial of blood, bone marrow, a chunk of flesh, and human hair. Each element is needed to finish the painting that you are currently working on and is going to be your magnum opus. The core mechanic in this game is exploring the house in

order to gather materials to finish your painting. By venturing out from your art studio you gather information and the history of yourself and your family. Navigation and interactions stay consistent throughout the levels. When your mouse is placed over an interactive item there is a little icon that shows up that shows you what is needed, a key, a match to light the candles, or if it is locked and therefore unavailable. Something surprising about this game is that there is no dialogue. There are some voice overs as if played from a memory that play when you pick up certain items. Each of the items that come with a voice over are integral to understanding your history.

Observer was released in 2016 and explores interactive insanity. Bloober Team drew inspiration from *Blade Runner, Cyberpunk 2020,* and comic books. They wanted to distinguish themselves from Japanese and American cyberpunk. *Observer* follows a new age future detective named Daniel Lazarski, who is uncovering a mystery that led to his son's death. You find out information of events leading up to the death of his son by asking the tenants of the building if they heard or saw anything suspicious. As you play you begin to uncover the possible suspects, more victims, and an underground black market cyborg augmentation scientist that may have taken their experimenting too far. The core mechanic is hacking into people's memories to help the player solve the mystery of what happened. Both of these play an important role and play off each other to help you solve the mystery. The basic mechanics for navigation remain consistent between both real-world and memory hacking. You navigate the space with the classic arrow keys and mouse to select things. The dialogue system was multiple choice with branches but would also employ feedback loops covering options that you had not selected so as the player you got the well rounded idea and a good amount of evidence. Within the memory sequences there would be, among other things, mini games. Most of them used the same arrow mechanics but the objective always changed. Sometimes you were playing a type of hide-and-seek to download data from computers, other times you were walking through a foggy forest and you had to use your different lenses to see where you actually were. The mechanics stayed the same but the way you usalized them changed depending on the sequence.

Blair Witch came to fruition because Lionsgate approached Bloober Team to create a game for them. Lionsgate owned the rights to the *Blair Witch* name and subsidiaries, and liked what Bloober team had done with *Layers of Fear*. Bloober team had mostly total creative freedom for the game and they wanted to explore how humans can descend into darkness. They

drew inspiration from *Firewatch, Outlast,* and *Alan Wake.* They watched movies that were in the "found-footage" genre such as *REC* and *Paranormal Activity. Blair Witch* was released in August 2019. It is a single player first-person survival horror game. You play as Ellis Lynch, a man who joins a search party to find a missing boy, Peter, in the forest of Black Hills. You, along with your trusty dog sidekick Bullet, explore the woods hoping to find the boy and solve the mystery of his disappearance. Along the way you find a camcorder and assorted tapes that, depending on the color, can change reality and rewind time. Bullet is used as a mechanic within the game and based upon his body language you know if there is danger and how "sane" you are. Navigation in this game is simple arrow and mouse exploration. The woods you are exploring are engineered to make you get lost and so you find yourself going in circles in an attempt to find a way out. Tapes are used to see things that have happened or could happen and you have the power to change its outcome.

The first cominality that comes to mind when thinking of these aforementioned games is the genre. These games are all psychological horror games. They were engineered to get your heart racing. All are told as first person games but *Layers of Fear* takes it further by not letting you see the body you inhabit while *Observer* and *Blair Witch* place the camera behind the head of the character you control. "We've found that psychological horror is the best way to tell our players stories that are inspiring and interesting to us," says Bloober Team's writer, VO coordinator, and narrative designer, Grzegorz Like. He also said "We believe art, music and characters are more likely to be remembered long after you finish the game and we're always keen on making those memories stick with the player for years….Our primary goal is to create something memorable, beautiful and cool!" One of the founders of Bloober team Peter Babieno says that " I decided we should focus on the genre that would be very close to our [tastes]...[Psychological horror] is…in our DNA."

All games played interact with the idea of insanity as a main character component and how one can and will interact with insanity. All three games journey through the process of going insane and how different contexts will change how the insanity presents itself. With *Layers of Fear* it's the journey of a painter going insane, in *Blair Witch* it's a man who means well but goes insane, and in *Observer* it is a scientist who goes insane with power and ideas for the future.

To balance out the slow, or fast-paced descent into insanity there is also hope. Hope throughout the games is portrayed differently and to differing levels but it is still present. Within

Layers of Fear hope is conveyed through the idea that maybe something within his memories will wake him up or that he feels remorse and that's the reason for his painting in the first place. Hope is introduced through the idea that you can stop the scientist from going too far and stop his path of destruction in *Observer.* The hope that keeps you looking in the woods for Peter is the hope that you can find him and that he will be okay when you find him in *Blair Witch.*

All this hope is tied to redemption. Each character is trying to redeem either themselves, their actions, or someone else around them. In *Blair Witch* Ellis is trying to redeem himself by finding Peter. He has a past as a police officer and fell off the wagon in some way and is now using this opportunity to find Peter as a way to possibly rewrite his public reputation in his small town. He is also trying to redeem his family because through playing you realize that Peter is Ellis' brother. He doesn't want his family's name to be in the news again and have shame and pity following his family around if Peter can't be found. Dan in *Observer* is trying to redeem the victims by catching the monster that is running around killing people. In this way he is also trying to redeem his city that is being attacked by this unknown monster. The Painter (legit that is what the character is called, he doesn't have a name) in *Layers of Fear* is searching for a way to redeem his scavenging from people by turning it into a work of art that reflects what is important. Though this depends on the ending you get, the painting is either the Wife and Daughter (also don't have names), or it is of himself and it is hung in a museum, or it is just a blob that the painter throws away in disgust amidst the many other painting that are all the exact same as the one he just finished. Of course, we as Christians know that real redemption came to us in the form of Jesus dying for our sins. Bloober Team makes games that are about deeper topics and don't quite make the last little step to connect them to a larger biblical theme.

The games played all deal with memory in some large way. Whether you are hacking into others'(*Observer)*, rewriting and replaying them (*Blair Witch)*, or reliving yours (*Layers of Fear),* they are integral parts of the gameplay and narrative. Memory is woven into the narratives differently and does a good job of not making the memory parts too complicated for the players to understand. Whether wanting memory to play a role in all their games is intentional or just a coincidence, the idea doesn't seem forced. The memory mechanics partnered with the themes of insanity creates a whole new mechanic and narrative component: different realities. Some of the realities portrayed across these games are better than others. Across these Bloober Team games

you can take a pretty good guess that the alternate reality of the character is going to be a dark reality.

Like the cartoon *Scooby-Doo,* Bloober Team teaches us that the real villain is a human being. "We wanted to include tales of human lives where the ghosts are the least you should worry about in our game." is what Grzegorz Like, Bloober Team's writer said about the characters that are portrayed in Bloober Team's games. I think this can then be connected to the fact that we as humans are fallen beings in need of saving. Bloober Team's games gets you right up close to the real enemy but doesn't jump the gap there to connect it to a deeper issue.

I picked this company to do my project on because they are a small company that has made big waves in the video game industry. I also want to go into horror games because I enjoy the psychology behind it and how it makes people react. They also use unreal engine and that is what we are taught here and it has been really cool to see all the things they have been able to do with the same software that I use.

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