

Subtle Secrets or Self-Sabotage?

How *Layers of Fear* handles player choice

The 2016 psychological horror video game *Layers of Fear* has the showcases the interesting ability to alter the player's perception of reality as it will often change the physical landscape the player traverses on a regular yet unseen basis, often when the player looks away for only a moment. This is one of the main talking points of this game in particular but there is another interesting aspect this game has to offer, the player's choices throughout the story. *Layers of Fear* is a game that encourages players to seek out its different endings but offers players almost no help or advice to achieve this.

The game has a strong focus on introducing the story of our protagonist, known only as the painter, through introducing the player to various points in his life through interactable items such as personal belongings, handwritten notes, and newspaper clippings of his successes and failures. Throughout the game, we uncover the truth behind the painter's life and the dark truth about the misfortunes he has encountered. At first, we are to believe that he is the victim of circumstance and unfortunate tragedy, only to later realize that while he is not responsible for every bad event that transpires on his life, he has only himself to blame for how

these events destroyed his relationship with his wife and daughter. By the end of the game, most players are met with an ending that sees the painter continue to be driven mad as it is revealed he is in a waking nightmare, doomed to repeat his failures. The game then restarts the player at the start of the game, hinting on the idea that the player can do things a bit differently this time.

On these repeated playthroughs, with the idea of alternative endings now present, players are now left with one question: “How can I reach a different conclusion?” That is where the game gets much more complex with its demands for a different ending. Unlike other games such as *Undertale* or *Mass Effect* where these games give a good indication on how you can get the “good” and “bad” endings, *Layers of Fear* has a much more subtle approach to player choices. It requires very specific and intentional actions from the player to achieve these alternative endings. These actions, as noted by a ending guide written by Kelsey Raynor titled *Layer Of Fear (2016): How to Get Every Ending*, have direct correlations with the story. The actions range from going toward a monstrous version of your wife that torments you halfway through the game, representing your acceptance of her, to admiring your own painting in the house, representing the prideful side of the painter. These actions do well to add to the themes and immersion of the game, but without proper guidance to make these choices, most

players will either miss them entirely or worse, become frustrated in attempts to uncover these choices in order to achieve a desired ending.

This unusually subtle approach to story progression and player choice has been met with mixed reactions from those who have played the game. Positive reviews on the game praise the progression style “The game lets players explore the protagonist’s past via notes, monologs and diary entries scattered about. These pieces of text begin to paint a picture of the past leading up to the game’s hellish events ... What I like the most about *Layers of Fear* is that it feels very focused.” (Melendez, CJ, *Rely on Horror.com*) and compliments the narrative being told “The first thing that struck me about *Layers of Fear* was its brilliant pacing. Things start out slow, and as they gradually start progressing, tension gracefully seeps in. Almost without noticing, you find yourself in a grand orgy of fear and terror.” (Diederichs, Wiehahn, *memeburn.com*) These reviews highlight the biggest strength of *Layers of Fear*, the story, a crucial component to making the player choices have weight. If players do not care about the overall story, then why would they care to make choices to alter it?

While the story is a stronger aspect of *Layers of Fear*, the gameplay progression has been cited to be one of its weaker aspects, with reviews accounting moments of confusion being a source of frustration. One review recounts a specific area in the game regarding a frustrating experience that destroys the game’s

pacing: “It also messes with its own pacing at the very end due to a puzzle that’s basically a 3D pixel hunt – you’re looking for tiny checkers in a very big area.”

(Kelsey, R. *NerdyButFlirty.com*). This is a good example on how the game can be unclear not only with specific character choices but with its own level designs, as events like this only frustrates the player and negatively impacts the story, taking away from the game’s biggest draw in the process. The majority of player choices also fall victim to this, as they are frustrating to uncover as the game does little to identify what counts as a meaningful choice. One example would be a wheelchair the player has to push in order to get the “good ending” but this is not conveyed as something the player is able to do in the slightest, the wheelchair looking identical to several static props found throughout the mansion the game takes place.

Layers of Fear has its players make subtle choices that fit well into its narrative and reward players for paying closer attention to the failings of its protagonist. It makes these seemingly random choices connect meaningfully to a story that, by its own nature of being expanded upon by in-game items found by exploration, demands player investment. In that regard, a subtle approach is welcomed to allow players to earn a conclusion by intended choices, rather than chance. The biggest problem lies in the fact that these actions are subtle to the point of almost being hidden, pushing players away from personal investment into detailed guides that give rigid rules on how to acquire desired endings. While there

is truth in the idea of allowing players freedom to explore being positive, *Layers of Fear* would benefit in giving players more direction, especially in terms of what actions and choices players are able to take. While the result of these actions should remain unknown, there is little to no harm in making sure your players understand what actions substantial and what choices are available. This would more effectively lean into the game's narrative strength and eliminate player confusion based on unclear instruction. This can be achieved with internal dialogue, using it to highlight specific sections where players are now aware of their ability to act instead of simply react as they have done throughout most of the game. *Layers of Fear* has a story that does a lot to invest the player with multiple endings that reflect well on the player choices required to achieve them, but lacks the natural, immersive direction to allow players to understand why they would be making these choices in the first place.

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