**Silent Hill Downpour Review (PS3)**

**Rating: 3.5**

**Class:** Commercial

**Genre:** Survival Horror/Action

**Publisher:** Konami

**Release Date:** March 13, 2012

**Multiplayer:** No

**Rating:** Mature

 The issue of morality is a subjective one. The line between right and wrong isn't always as clearly defined as some would prefer it to be. How do we deal with the choices we make when our actions affect more than just our own lives? Does murder beget murder? Is revenge the only way? How far are you willing to go to get what you want? Silent Hill: Downpour does its best to address these questions, though admittedly the game backs away from taking a deeper look at some of its more interesting themes like the possible justification of murder. However, the game keeps a consistently tense atmosphere and has plenty of scares to make for quite a wild ride.

 The Silent Hill series has had its ups and downs especially in the past few years. After the original Japanese development team known as "Team Silent" disbanded long ago, Konami has had a rough time resurrecting the series back from the ashes. They have had several Western studios try to put their own spin on games in the franchise, however many found that their new style and gameplay strayed too far from what made Silent Hill unique and ultimately the games fell flat. Though not at all perfect Silent Hill Downpour does a great job of staying true to the series' core gameplay and aesthetics, while still adding some new ideas. The result is what I would call a nostalgic look back at classic survival-horror.

 You play as Murphy Pendleton, a convicted felon who has been locked up for several years at the Ryall State Prison. In the beginning of the game Murphy strikes a deal with a corrections officer in order to get in close contact with the sequestered inmate Patrick Napier. For unknown reasons, Murphy is seeking revenge against Napier and corners him in the prison shower where he violently attacks him. Soon after, Murphy and a few other inmates are set to be transferred by bus to a maximum security prison. The bus’ route ends up passing by the outskirts of Silent Hill. Suddenly, the road ahead drops off and the driver is forced to swerve, sending the bus careening down a hill into a ravine. Murphy awakens from the crash in the woods below the road. He then realizes that if he wants his freedom he’ll have to make his way through the nearby town of Silent Hill. There the town does what it does best, and it throws him into a nightmarish world filled with disturbing creatures where he’ll be forced to deal with the demons of his past, his darkest fears, and his deepest regret.

 Downpour ultimately plays as a third-person survival horror game. It primarily focuses on exploration and puzzle-solving, with combat taking a backseat. Like many games in the genre, the fighting mechanics are limited and more often than not you’re encouraged to run away from enemies rather than attack. Murphy isn’t a trained soldier, he’s an average Joe and as such he has no intricate combos or takedowns to aid him in battle. This means that fighting is mostly designed as a last resort. Though on most difficulties, I found that combat was pretty straightforward once you got the hang of it. Swinging your weapon in the general direction of an enemy will almost always land a hit and the game assists you by automatically aiming at the nearest enemy. Attacking at a distance is rarely an option as guns and ammo are scarce. Also several times throughout the game there are certain scripted scenes that force you to discard your weapons, leaving any bullets you had collected behind. Thankfully, the game offers over 30 different melee weapons to choose from and most of them are everyday objects so you’ll never have to look too hard to find one. Every weapon is breakable however, most bottles and chairs only have one hit uses. Wooden objects are plentiful, but are easily broken while metal ones are rarer and tend to last a lot longer. Luckily, it doesn’t take long to figure out which weapons work the best and for me I honestly did fine just using the fire axe for most of the game. There were a few gameplay mechanics that did frustrate me a bit. Whenever I could find a gun I would try to use it, but I quickly realized the game really didn’t want me to. Every time Murphy points a firearm he automatically drops the melee weapon he was holding instead of putting it in his inventory, this forces you to have to pick the weapon back up whenever you fire a gun. Though this doesn’t seem like much, it can make for very awkward situations when you’re trying to switch between weapons during a battle. Indoors can especially be a pain because many other melee weapons tend to be scattered on the ground. This often leads to moments where you’ll accidentally pick up the wrong weapon and will have to repeat the process of dropping and picking back up your weapon all while enemies are attacking you. It’s increasingly baffling to me that they implemented this because your inventory is so largely underused and it just seems like a halfhearted way to make the combat more difficult. Still, combat was never a main focus in the series and Downpour does keep it simple for the most part. Again fighting doesn’t take much effort and most of the time the game gives you the option of avoiding it entirely.

 Puzzles are still a big part of the game, although the amount of time and effort it took to solve them has dropped considerably since the older games used them. They’re mostly trial and error, having to figure out the right patterns with the occasional vague poem to dissect, but even on the higher difficulties most of the puzzles are extremely simple to figure out. Whether or not you enjoy solving the puzzles really just depends on your taste, but if you’re looking for a challenge you might be disappointed. I personally liked the easier difficulty they added because I felt the older games’ puzzles were a bit nonsensical and needlessly complex. Regardless, the puzzles are still very imaginative in their execution. They’re strange, sometimes unsettling, and always unique to the situation. Whether it be finding a beating heart in a basement or setting the stage for a bizarre children’s play, Downpour does a great job of incorporating the puzzles into the game and they only stand to help the already tense and unnerving atmosphere.

 While the puzzles in Downpour are more streamlined, exploration has been expanded on in the game more than ever. This time around the game takes place in a previously unexplored part of Silent Hill near the eastern region. Early on you’ll search through an abandoned diner and explore the remains of an old tourist attraction called The Devils Pit, but eventually you will be led into the main town where you’ll be spending most of your time. You’ll find maps as you progress and they’re usually essential as you can get lost easily. The town is huge and there are more places to explore than any other game in the series. Though not entirely free roaming, you’ll be surprised as to the amount of depth and detail put into every nook and cranny of the town. Buildings and houses that would usually just be background designs in earlier games are now open and able to be searched. In each house you can often find secrets about former occupants, with this revealing more and more about the town’s dark past. Finding the scribbled writings of a deranged stalker or uncovering a horrific family murder are just a few of the side plots you’ll find that will make your hair stand on end. Many times you’ll need to find certain weapons in order to get by obstacles in your way. Using an ax you can chop down boarded-up doors and the hook blade pulls down fire escape ladders allowing you to get up to higher buildings. This isn’t only limited to plot related portions of the game either, as there are over a dozen different side quests to unlock in town and the game constantly rewards you for finding new areas. There are also several artifacts you can collect that are scattered around the town and even extra side quests to unlock after you’ve beaten the game. This gives Downpour great replay value so for those trophy hunters out there you won’t be disappointed. I can honestly say I had the most fun when I was traversing the town and just checking in every creepy old house I could find. Uncovering new places only added to the mystery of the town. I sincerely hope they keep the town this expansive in future titles, as this is a welcome improvement.

 Exploring is great, but what would Silent Hill be without its monsters? Sadly the creatures this time around are a bit lackluster. You’ll fight screaming humanoid creatures and hulking beasts, but none of them seem too subtle. After their initial encounter their scare quickly wears off and after a while I felt like I was just going through the motions. Their designs look pretty dull and unimaginative, it also doesn’t help that there isn’t much variation between monsters that you fight. Luckily the game keeps them dangerous. Downpour implements a new weather system that affects the creatures you fight and is what gives the game its namesake. The harder it rains the more hostile enemies become. When it rains, enemies actively seek Murphy out and often attack in groups. The rain comes and goes every few minutes, but the game warns you of the coming storm with thunder and lightning beforehand. It’s easy to get overwhelmed by enemies when this happens though and your best bet is to seek shelter indoors. This mechanic definitely helps keep up the action and intensity in the town, despite the lack of interesting looking monsters.

 How does the story pan out? Well newcomers will be happy to know that Downpour is a standalone game in the series and besides a few minor Easter eggs there aren’t many significant references to older games (though I do recommend playing some of the old ones if you haven’t). It’s a very personal journey and as such you’ll uncover much about Murphy’s past and figure out what haunts him. Murphy though not entirely memorable, still manages to stay likable because he reacts so realistically to the things going on around him and stays persistent on his journey despite the lack of immediate answers. The story stays pretty predictable throughout most of the game, but there are a few twists and turns near the end to keep you invested. You’ll encounter a strange cast of characters though most are a bit one-dimensional. My favorite however is definitely Howard. He’s this eerie mailman in an abandoned town who always seems a little too calm. Talking with him was always strange and he seemed to know more than he let on. As now it’s a staple of the series, there are several different endings you can get. A handful of moral choice options are sprinkled throughout the game and although the answers tend to be very black or white, they affect the outcome of your ending. There are over six endings you can receive and they vary wildly depending on your playthrough, one special ending is only unlocked after you’ve beaten the game one time already. The story is basic, but it’s Murphy’s journey that keeps you engaged.

 The atmosphere of Downpour is definitely its strong point. The game is constantly stressful and playing it will give you the same familiar sinking feeling that you get with any Silent Hill title. Though jump scares are present, they’re used sparingly and the game focuses more on what you don’t see and the fear of the unknown to create tension. The game’s score is amazing and newcomer Daniel Licht does a great job of staying true to the original sounds of old games, while still keeping his own style and helping Downpour stand out in the series. The soundtrack consists of mainly simple melodies, but each track fits well to every scene and overall sounds haunting and suspenseful. The piano and mandolin are often heard throughout, giving Downpour a slightly country twang and surprisingly fits well with the tone. Any subtlety the monster designs lacked are made up for with the game’s presentation. As you might have guessed water is Downpour’s main theme. Water is very significant to Murphy’s past and the developers use it in a variety of ways in game. Besides aesthetic value water is used to convey danger, solve certain puzzles, and even transition between the infamous Otherworld sequences.

Unfortunately the Otherworld is one major part of Downpour that needed polish. These parts of the game end up being nothing more than glorified on-rail sequences and are over far too quickly. Though intense the first time around, they quickly become predictable and most of your time in this world will be spent running away from a dark empty void. You’re not really given much time to slow down or explore the environments and even enemies are scarce. Thankfully this is really my biggest gripe and like I said earlier the game makes up for the lulls in action with much-needed expanded exploration of the town. I highly recommend Silent Hill Downpour, despite a few flaws it’s a fun game that’ll keep you on the edge of your seat. If you’re a Silent Hill fan or just looking for a good survival horror game then you could do much worse than Downpour.

Accessibility Issues

* Visibility

-Though in town the game can look quite bright, most of the game is very dark indoors and the use of the flashlight is almost always a necessity. Darkened rooms and obscured paths are often used as scare tactics in the game, so those with visual impairments may have trouble. However there is a brightness level that can be adjusted in the options menu and it helps greatly. Also, items and weapons tend to blend in with the environment and sometimes it can be difficult to tell what items you can and can’t pick up. Fortunately there is an option to have items more visibly highlighted.

-The game’s HUD is basically empty. There aren’t many menus used to speak of besides the start menu and your inventory, both are fairly easy to read. Your journal does tend to have faded writing, fortunately there’s a zoom option available to get a much better glimpse. There are no health or stamina bars and the map is located in the Journal found in a separate menu. When the player is being hit splotches of dark red blood flash up on the screen for a moment indicating that Murphy is hurt. Also, Murphy gets more and more bloodstains on his body as his health depletes. Though this may be hard to see for some players, there’s also an easier way to check Murphy’s health by going to the pause menu and looking at the statistics portion.

-There are no colorblind options available in the game. Most of the game’s environments consist mainly of shades of greys and browns, but colorblind players shouldn’t have too hard of a time playing this game. Red is only really prominent when blood is shown on the walls or floor, and even then it’s only used for aesthetic value never to progress the story. Certain parts of the Otherworld have walls that are reddish-brown and sometimes a bright red void chases you through the level, but during the game the color red is never used to differentiate between doors or certain items. However, like most of the games in the series, the map is constantly updated with red and blue symbols indicating where the main character has been, where they can’t go, and places of interest. This could definitely pose a problem for colorblind players, but the symbols aren’t recognized by color alone they’re also recognized by shape. Locked doors or entrances are indicated by scribbled lines, passageways or directions are usually indicated by arrows or a circled area, and question marks are used to indicate points of interest

* Hearing

-Like most games in the Silent Hill series the background noise, ambient sounds, and the music are a big part of the atmosphere. For most deaf players this will put them at a big disadvantage when it comes to the scares and make it hard for immersion. However, they should have no problem beating the actual game and the main story as every audio indicator is accompanied by a visual indicator as well.

-Though enemies frequently sneak up on the player, certain enemies like the Screamers emit a loud screech before they attack. Their yell is an audio indicator, but it also has a visual indicator shown as a bright fluorescent mist.

* Subtitles

-There are subtitles available, but there are no captions. The subtitles are large and fairly easy to read, but character names are never specified when someone is talking. Also, there isn’t an option for the subtitles to be letterboxed. I can only think of one time when two people’s dialogue ever overlapped, but even then it shouldn’t be too difficult to understand what’s being said.

-Incidental dialogue is also subtitled. Several times during the game Murphy will comment on something he sees or will talk to himself about certain obstacles in his way and this dialogue is also all subtitled for your convenience.

* Precision

-Aiming precision is never a necessity in the game. Even when using firearms there are no advantages to getting head shots, so just by pressing the attack button your hits should connect automatically.

-There are a few quick time events sprinkled throughout the game. Most of time they involve rapidly pressing the X button to push or pull something, though sometimes shaking the left control stick or holding down the trigger buttons is required. Some enemies will stun Murphy or grab on to him, when this happens you must shake the left control stick to get free or Murphy will slowly lose health. However, I have noticed that waiting a while will give you the same results you’ll just lose a little health. There are several moments in the game when you’ll cross a bridge that breaks; you then have to pull yourself back up by alternating between holding down two of the trigger buttons usually R2 and L2. Any of the quick time events can range from painfully easy to extremely frustrating depending on your mobility.

-Though rarely an issue, there are a few moments when timing is necessary in the game. During some of the QTEs you’ll have to quickly alternate between tapping the X button and then pressing Square all within a timed event. One particularly challenging moment that happened to me near the end of the game involves an enemy grabbing Murphy through the bars of a jail cell and you have to shake the left control stick much more violently than you normally would in order to get the enemy off of you. The last boss battle has the most button

mashing moments in the whole game, so some players may have a tough time here. Also, there are moments when Murphy has to cross balance beams and will fall if you don’t turn left control stick in the opposite direction. Though timing is important here, but the beams don’t require much effort.

* Controls

-Controlling Murphy involves using the left analog stick to move around. The right analog stick is used to manually control the camera, but the camera does automatically follow Murphy as you change direction which means it is possible to control Murphy with just the left analog stick if you prefer. The camera’s axis can also be reversed in the options menu. Square is the attack burton, X is the action button and circle is the cancel button, while Triangle is used to block. I honestly went through the whole game without ever pressing block though.

-Holding the R1 button allows you to run, R2 lets you throw your weapon and will automatically aim and shoot your gun. L1 is used for looking behind you, but it seemed mostly useless to me. L2 puts the player into a fighting stance, which seemed pointless to me because the attack button basically does the same thing. R3 zooms in and L3 turns the flashlight on and off.

-Up on the directional pad will open your inventory, the left directional pad equips any firearm you have, the right directional pad is a quick-heal option though you can also manually go into your inventory and use the first aid kit there if you like, and down on the directional pad doesn’t do anything.

-There are no remappable controls whatsoever and one handed players will most likely have a hard time playing this game. I personally had a difficult time having to press L3 every time I needed to turn the flashlight on and with so many of the buttons having little to no use I felt their choice of button placement was baffling.

* Difficulty

-There are three difficulty levels on starting the game: Easy, Normal, and Hard. There are also three other separate levels that affect the puzzles in the game and they similarly are Easy, Normal, and Hard. None of the levels can be changed during play, but for the most part the gameplay isn’t especially difficult as can always run away.

-Raising the difficulty level affects the enemy rate in town and their aggressiveness. Also the amount of first aid kits and ammo is lowered as the level is increased. The puzzle difficulty doesn’t increase by much. You’ll mostly just have to go farther out of your way to get certain items for each puzzle.

-There are no alternate configurations and there aren’t any premade control types to choose from. However, there are a few unofficial game assists you can utilize. The game automatically locks on to the nearest enemy you’re fighting and when a gun is equipped pressing R2 will automatically shoot the nearest enemy as long as you’re facing its general area.

-There is no option to save your game manually, but the game auto-saves at certain checkpoints. Loading your game can be problematic however, as it’s difficult to distinguish when a checkpoint is reached. Though the game pops up a symbol in the top right corner of the screen to show when it’s loading, it never specifies whether it’s loading a new area or saving the game and that symbol is used for both. In my experience, I can say that the game always saves when you walk into a building or house so that’s one thing you can count on.

At a Glance

Mobility: Controls are mostly simple and precision isn’t usually necessary, but the occasional quick time event may frustrate certain players. Also, there are no remappable controls available whatsoever. Recommended score: 4/10

Hearing: All dialogue is subtitled in the game, though there are no letterboxing options. Deaf players shouldn’t have much trouble playing the actual game, but much of the game’s scare tactics revolve around audio so there may be difficulty experiencing certain things in the game. Recommended score: 6/10

Vision: Color blind players shouldn’t have much trouble as there are no color specific objects in the game. There also brightness options that can be adjusted to the users preference. Recommended score: 3/10

Summary

Silent Hill Downpour is kind of a mixed bag. The gameplay is mostly simple, but the control options are limited. The colorblind shouldn’t have much trouble playing this, but deaf players will have a distinct disadvantage immersing themselves in the atmosphere. While precision aiming isn’t necessary, QTE’s and button mashing make unwanted appearances and only serve to hinder the experience. My biggest concern was just not having remappable controls as for me this would have made my play through much easier.