

REVIEW: *LAYERS OF FEAR*

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Layers of Fear is a psychedelic horror game available on all major gaming platforms. It caught my attention when it was offered for free to Xbox Live Gold Members. While many games are offered every month, this particular title stood out to me as the first horror-based game I had encountered in a while that would not be unduly expensive. With the most expensive listing coming in at around \$20, this game is a steal for most. Being a junkie of all things horror, I could not possibly pass up the opportunity to expand my library while also succumbing to my desire for a good scare-induced adrenaline rush.

The game begins with the protagonist, who remains unnamed, returning home after a court hearing. A quick look around the house will reveal that nothing appears to be out of the ordinary. Upon returning to his workshop to begin his *magnum opus*, he is thrown into hallucinations of his past just after applying the first layers to his canvas. It is revealed that the protagonist was once a renowned painter with a wife and child. Unable to balance the stress of time-consuming work and attending to his family, his psyche begins to crack. With his work beginning to reflect more gore than beauty, relationships with friends and family begin to crumble.

Returning to the present day, we are shown just how psychologically twisted the protagonist has become. The extent of this is truly revealed when we discover the

materials from which he creates his masterpiece. The skin, blood, bone marrow, hair, fingers, and eyes have all been harvested from his dead wife who was driven to suicide by his constant neglect. His insanity only becomes more apparent to us as we cautiously venture through the dark corridors of the home and are thrown into his past and current madness, revealing just how far into the void desperation can push someone.

The game does an excellent job of playing tricks on the mind of the player, making the experience that much more enjoyable. The player begins to feel just as mad as the painter between the disappearing doors, entering the room you were just in no matter what door you choose, and the paintings you swore were in a different place a moment ago. I found myself questioning my own eyes and ears throughout the duration of the game and wondering if what I was seeing was the game's doing or simply a blunder entirely in my own mind. It is a game that truly tests the clarity of one's head.

While death is very easily avoidable in *Layers of Fear*, for those who like to push the boundaries and chase the fear there is a kill loop that sets play back only a little. With no real repercussions for dying once the player is "captured" and meets their end, they simply start back from a moment incredibly close to their demise. This type of gameplay is comparable to that of *P.T.* by

Kojima Studios. While there was a little controversy about the similarity between the two, *Layers of Fear* is clearly its own entity with a storyline unique to itself.

The game offers three alternate endings for the player to encounter classified as good, bad, and neutral. Each is determined by the choices of the player as they slowly unravel the terror that surrounds them. This leaves room for varying interpretations of the plot and an expansion to the amount of time one can dedicate to the game. Whether you will accept the hand you are dealt at the end of the game or choose to experience the madness in a different light is completely up to you.

We are offered a chance to be brought back into the horror with the release of the *Inheritance* DLC. Returning this time as the daughter of the painter, we are given the opportunity to face the past with a new perspective. Reliving the memories of her horrific childhood proves to be a slightly more interactive experience than the original game was, providing more dialogue from both parents as well. Given the chance to create artwork alongside the father provides us a window to view him in different lights. Similar to the main game, one can encounter three alternate endings. However, this time around, we have available to us a good, bad, and true ending rather than neutral.

A common question one tends to ask themselves is “Why”? Why should I play this game? How will it benefit me? If it is *not* simply for a good time, perhaps it is to take something away from it. In *Layers of Fear*, there are many notes and small details that paint a much larger picture. In many of these collectibles the protagonist criticizes

and questions the actions of others. He points out their flaws while doubting/blaming them for all the negative aspects of his life. There is little evidence that the painter looks inward in search of the answers to how his life became this way. This shows no self-doubt or questioning of his mental health on his end.

The protagonist is noted abusing alcohol and he later states it is not his first time. Despite knowing that this was an obvious problem before, the painter continues forward disregarding any idea that some of this might be his fault. Maybe if he did not view the world in this light and took some responsibility for his actions the outcome may have differed. The game offers a good platform for self-reflection. We are shown just how far down the rabbit hole you can go if you refuse to look around and recognize who is truly to blame.

What *Layers of Fear* failed to do is be uniquely scary. Filled with just about every horror cliché in the book, I found myself slightly disappointed. I felt like it was more or less a predictable jump-scare extravaganza. The complexity of the story left room for more than just slamming doors, faint whispering, and telekinetic mischief. I would have liked to see something out of the ordinary from Bloober Team as I saw this as a pristine opportunity for redemption after the flops of some of their previous games.

Given the nature of the game, you can expect flashing lights and surprise scares. The tone is generally eerie and surprises lie around every corner. This game is not recommended to anyone prone to seizures or with severe heart conditions. There is also mention of suicide. I express caution and

advise you play at your own risk and take mental/medical conditions that may be affected into consideration.

Overall, *Layers of Fear* is an interesting experience that excellently uses visuals and sounds to immerse the player into horrifying and creepy scenarios. This game does an amazing job of balancing gross and unsettling horror, well-placed startling jump scares, and intriguing storytelling. Despite the exceptional atmosphere that more than gets the job done of preparing the player to jump out of their seats when something goes bump in the night, the game lacks any real gameplay for the most part. There are few choices to be made and almost no real player interaction besides looking in a certain direction and opening the hundreds of drawers scattered throughout the game. You are more or less just along for the ride as you delve into the eerie crevices of the main character's mind. I found it to be much more similar to watching an outstanding horror movie at your own pace than it is to playing a game.

The game is fairly short – only sporting around an hour and a half to two hours of gameplay. All things accounted for, the game would be worth the time of anyone who enjoys a horror game that sinks you perfectly into its dismal world while explaining the truly demented and terrifying tale in bits and pieces that keeps the curious player motivated to move forward. I would be a liar if I said it did not manage to get a few well-earned screams out of me. However, the scare tactics felt a tad stale. All in all, the game fared well and was positively received on most ends. I invite anyone to take a chance to uncover the layers of fear.

References

Dykiel, Eryk, prog., Pawel Niezabitowski, and Michał Król, des., Bloober Team, dev. *Layers of Fear*. Austin, TX: Aspyr Media, 2016/2018. Video Game.