**Downfall – Windows (2009)**

Sexuality and violence are the norm in popular current-gen videogames, but the intention is commercial rather than artistic. More silly than mature and more empty than meaningful, essentially attempts to appeal to gamers’ base pleasures, to give them the chance to absorb themselves in satisfying albeit inane carnage. Bikini-wearing girls and muscled army men shooting big guns to kill generic enemies through bland environments.

But sexuality and violence don’t have to be such superficial themes. Exploitation might be tantamount to desensitization, but there can be reason and merit behind this. Sexuality and violence were favorite themes of renowned literary figures such as Anthony Burgess and the Marquis de Sade. They explore and explain our fascination with this primal fetishism, argue that they exist for more than simple marketing tactics. Because although many videogames use them for capital gain, other videogames use them for, y’know, aesthetically pleasing purposes: art, expression, etc. *Silent Hill 2* is a glorious example. *Dark Seed*, *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream*, and *Dreamweb* also spring to mind.

Independent adventure game developer Harvester Games, which is led almost entirely by Remigiusz Michalski, created another entry into this highly laudable category: *Downfall*.

The bulk of the indie adventure game scene is neither pretty nor polished nor creative nor really worth much of your time, but once in a while somebody uses Chris Jones’ Adventure Game Studio for something spectacular, a game any lover of the genre shouldn’t miss, and *Downfall* is one of them. While not without its flaws, it’s a promising first effort. Along with other indie developers such as Wadget Eye Games, Harvester proves itself another promising figure for the future of independent videogame production.

*Downfall* is the product of Michalski getting tired of playing *The Secret of Monkey Island*, reading too many horror books as a child, and seeing gross, disturbing things while working at a home for the old and mentally ill. His goal was to make a really mature game, one that really bites players on psychological level. (Amusingly, Steam rejected *Downfall* from being sold in its stores due to its controversial content.) He also stated his dissatisfaction with how easy modern adventure games are and that he wished to make something unique while still going back to the genre’s roots.’

The story concerns Joe and Ivy, who together reach a small town on a stormy night looking for a room for the night. They take shelter in Quiet Haven Hotel. Things go off the deep end almost immediately. (Almost too fast if you want to get fussy.) After having an argument about their rocky marriage, Ivy disappears. What’s more, the hotel has transformed into a gruesome shadow of itself: Rooms covered with debris and carnage, blood coating the walls, even a dining room full of faceless corpses.

**Characters:**

[downfall\_joe.png] Joe Davis:

A troubled young man with a troubled marriage. He is stubbornly determined to keep things “the way they were,” attached to a past that may not have ever existed. His need to patch things up makes for an ideal adventure hero. He has a one-track mind, especially in regards to finding his wife, and thus very much willing to trudge through the horrors of the hotel as long as it means reaching his goal. Choices made by the player heavily affect his character development.

[downfall\_ivy.png] Ivy Davis:

Joe’s wife. She begins to game spouting hellish nonsense, piecing together imagery of blood and death and insanity. (This dialogue, as it happens, was in part lifted from some of the elders Michalski took care of.) She then promptly disappears. Though on screen for only a brief time, Ivy is an important figure to keep in mind.

[downfall\_agnes.png] Agnes:

Joe’s “sidekick” and for all intents and purposes his foil. Agnes is awakened on the night before her wedding by the ghost of her favorite rock star in order to help Joe. Convinced she is dreaming, she’s not fazed much by the horrors going on about town, though she’ll still cover her eyes whenever you’re in a room with corpses. Like Ivy, her purpose is much more integral to the plot than things appear. The name “Agnes” is also begrudgingly shared by Michalski’s real-life partner.

Joe learns from the hotel’s receptionist that his wife has been taken by a woman named Sophie. Exploring the hotel, Joe encounters Sophie in her many forms. Memories, more like. She is a crying child, a woe-begotten woman at a party, an obese sack of flesh in the bathtub, etc. Joe’s journey involves murdering these incarnations if he is ever to see his wife again. This sadistic edge desensitizes the players to brutish violence as much as Joe.

The game has three vastly contrasting endings. It is also generous enough to allow the players to see all three without much backtracking. The story, when things come full circle, is a mixed bag. It is multi-faceted and layered, but at first glance one can get the impression that it falls too heavily on horror tropes. This is of course pure opinion and up to player interpretation. Michalski himself describes *Downfall* as a deeply personal game. What this entails precisely is unclear, but the game does certainly touch upon subjects that normally don’t get attention in the mainstream: Eating disorders, insanity, broken relationships, sadism, and child abuse to name a few. They’re presented with no punches pulled. If nothing else, *Downfall* challenges players ceaselessly with its unapologetic presentation.

Graphically *Downfall* exceeds expectation. It has a sense of gritty style all its own, intermittently fading from color to black-and-white and splotched with blood. The look of the Quiet Haven Hotel is influenced by the nursing home Michalski worked at during the game’s creation. Not so much the blood and guts, but more so the sense of unease and disquiet, like something is making noises you can’t explain, the knowledge that dozens of people have died here keeping you on edge. The hand-drawn, low res (640x480, 32-bit) graphical style is lovely to behold. It has a skewed retro feel, in that essentially the style is reminiscent of old adventure games, but there are things happening on screen that would never happen in old adventure games.

Character designs are solid. They look like the characters one might find in a 2D *Silent Hill*. They are regrettably marred by choppy animation. (And doesn’t Ivy look way too much like she’s wearing a masquerade mask? Intentional?) But one must make allowances for minor flaws in independent games and this is one of them. Every character has a distinct appearance. Even the minor roles drip with personality, like the crazed neo-Nazi Doctor Z or the seductress hotel receptionist (whose corpse you discover hanging from the ceiling in her room). The cast is small but effective. The cadavers and monsters are wonderfully horrifying. While sometimes absurd, they never detract from the game’s overall style and atmosphere.

Gameplay is always the crux of adventure games. *Downfall*, noble a title as it is as a whole, falls behind in this respect. There’s just a jaggedness to most things. Take the inventory system, which will occasionally lock up for no reason. While easily worked around, it’s one of those curious glitches that deter from the experience. A few red herrings are tossed about as well, including a suspicious door labeled 666.

The puzzles themselves can be challenging though not unmanageable. One concerning a brainless cadaver is pretty difficult given a lack of guidance. (Just keep in mind scares can double as hints.) Many items also don’t disappear from your inventory when you’re done with them, meaning lots of clutter and confusion in item-based puzzles. Nonetheless you have to hand it to Michalski: None of the puzzles are arbitrary. They fit into the story and setting without complaint or question.

While most gameplay flaws can be overlooked, the most unforgivable is the boss battle near the end of the game. The point-and-click genre can and will develop more and more bad obtuse combat systems into their gameplay. Luckily here it’s over very quickly. While not game breaking or even terribly annoying, the problem here is that the combat comes off as stilted and silly when it’s supposed to be a pivotal moment in the story.

*Downfall*’s soundtrack is composed by Remi Michalski’s brother Michal Michalski. It is an eclectic mix ranging from Akira Yamaoka-esque ambiance to porn groove. The aim was to recreate the feeling of electronic music found in B-movies, but ended up more reminiscent of Angelo Badalamenti’s soundtrack to *Twin Peaks* or the tracks found in George Romero’s movies. The effect is sometimes a bit silly, but always suitable. The music is an integral part to the game’s unique atmosphere. Very cool, very bizarre, very creepy.

The problem with independent videogames is simple: Is it worth spending money on? *Downfall* costs $10. All things considered, its flaws and strengths and ambitions noted, *Downfall* is worth coughing up a few dollars for. The important thing is that it was created out of love, not for a profit. Michalski created a game for a very select audience in a genre that appeals to a small fanbase in the first place. Little aspects of the game show a true creator-player connection, like the bookshelf in Doctor Z’s room. It isn’t very long, it’s far from perfect, it can be jagged and gawky, but it is ceaselessly unique. Even, in its morose way, endearing. More than that, it’s an art game. And as far as artistic videogames are concerned, it’s important for the player to support their developers.

Harvester Games is currently working on their next project: *The Cat Lady*. Michalski has stated that the game will probably be even more gruesome than its predecessor. As yet the release date is unknown.

**Links:**

<http://prawkonj.republika.pl/harvest/index.html> - Harvest Games Website

<http://www.slowdown.vg/2009/06/06/downfall-interview-with-remigiusz-michalski/> - Slowdown Interview with Remi Michalski

<http://www.hardydev.com/2009/08/28/downfall-interview-with-remigiusz-michalski/> - Hardy Dev Interview with Remi Michalski

<http://www.adventureclassicgaming.com/index.php/site/interviews/510/> - Adventure Classic Gaming Interview with Remi Michalski

<http://www.hardydev.com/2009/07/10/downfall-review/> - Hardy Dev Review of Downfall

<http://www.slowdown.vg/2009/06/10/downfall-review/> - Slowdown Review of Downfall