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The Cat Lady - Review

A tale of life and death, heartache and hope, despair and survival -- in a game that has soul

Posted: 01/08/13 | Category: Review | Developer: Remigiusz Michalski/Harvester Games | Publisher: Screen 7 | Platform:

WARNING: This game contains flashing imagery, adult themes, violence, gore, nudity, sexual content and bad language. It's NOT suitable for players under 18 years of age or players of any age whose sensibilities are easily offended.

Genre: Psychological Horror Adventure

Release Date: 01 December 2012

Platform: PC

The Cat Lady is the finest horror adventure I've ever played. In fact, it's one of the finest adventure games I've ever played, period.

As you can tell from the above disclaimer, TCL is not for everyone. It can be extremely disturbing, particularly if you're the sensitive type. But it's also quite heartening and offers a story of surprising poignancy and depth.

About the Game

In development for three years, TCL is the creation of indie developer Remigiusz Michalski of Harvester Games, who brought us [Downfall](#) in 2009. As with Downfall, The Cat Lady was made using AGS (Adventure Game Studio).

If you've played Downfall, you'll encounter some familiar things in The Cat Lady. However, it's not necessary to have played the earlier game before playing this one, which stands on its own.

I have a great deal of respect for Mr. Michalski. He creates precisely the kinds of games he wants to create even if this makes them off-limits to big-name distributors. In fact, Downfall was rejected by Steam due to its controversial content. Mr. Michalski has said he has no hard feelings about this, and I believe him.

I don't want reveal too much about TCL's story; I think the game is best experienced without knowing much about it beforehand. All I knew going in was that it appeared to be dark, intense and bizarre -- three of my favorite things.

The game's main character, Susan Ashworth, is a middle-aged former nurse whose life has gone terribly wrong. This is written all over her face; she is far from glamorous. She looks world-weary and haggard. She looks the way I sometimes feel.

She lives alone in a dreary flat in a rundown part of town. She keeps to herself. She doesn't much care for people and rarely goes out. She has no friends.

Susan is also deep in the throes of clinical depression. Mr. Michalski has portrayed this disorder devastatingly well.

To some, Susan might appear whiny or full of self-pity. I don't see her that way. Clinical depression is more than just having a bad day or feeling down or discouraged. It can take hold of a person and make everything turn black. In the game, it's referred to as an "invisible illness." Indeed.

Susan hasn't always been as we find her. Life has dealt her some cruel blows that have caused her to retreat into herself. She's known as The Cat Lady because she feeds the stray cats in the neighborhood. They're the only living things she trusts. They're her only source of comfort.

The game is presented in seven chapters and wastes no time getting into the thick of things. It begins with Susan in the act of committing suicide. But she's not entirely successful.

As she regains an awareness of her surroundings, she finds herself standing in a field of barley in a place somewhere between life and death. Here, she encounters a strange old woman with a decidedly unsavory name. And thus begins a surreal, harrowing, unpredictable journey that could very well be Susan's salvation.

I found TCL's story so compelling that I lost myself in it. I felt immediate empathy for Susan. Her existence became my own.

Screen Shots



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She slips in and out of reality as she straddles the worlds of the living and the dead. Some things really do happen. Some take place in her troubled mind. Some are memories. Others are conjured up by the part of her that wants to die.

Gameplay

TCL has amazing atmosphere. Roughly drawn and animated, it uses color -- as well as the lack thereof -- very effectively. Photographs are mixed in with the game's hand-drawn graphics.

Characters' movements are somewhat erratic and stiff (no pun intended). At times, the game's lighting throbs, and backgrounds distort and vibrate.

All of this gives the game a raw and gritty feeling. And please take heed: some terrible things happen to Susan, and the game can get very bloody.

TCL uses side-scrolling navigation and is controlled via keyboard rather than mouse. The mechanics are explained at the beginning of the game. Everything, including inventory, is handled using the arrow and Enter keys.

I found this method of control appealing. I liked its simplicity, and it gave my mouse hand a much-needed break. Also, the navigation scheme is set up in such a way that pixel-hunting becomes completely unnecessary.

As a game, TCL is a little difficult to categorize. Considering what I've said so far, you might think it's a bleak tale of torment and misery. Not so.

In fact, the word "horror," as typically used, doesn't exactly fit. The game has its horrific aspects, to be sure, but I consider it more an exploration of the underbelly of the human condition. Susan could be a real woman, exaggerated or amplified. For me, this lends credibility to the game and gives it soul.

The Cat Lady covers a lot of emotional territory. Parts are permeated with fear, some subtle, some overt. Others are, by turns, revolting, touching, creepy, sad and -- believe it or not -- funny.

In Susan, Mr. Michalski has created one of the most vivid female characters I've ever encountered. I became quite attached to her during the course of the game, and I know I'll be thinking about her for some time to come.

Voice Acting and Sound

TCL's voice acting is first-rate. Particularly outstanding are Lynsey Frost as Susan, and Brittany Williams as Mitzi Hunt, a young woman who plays an important part in Susan's strange journey.

Also, I happily encountered the voice of Klemens Koehring, my old pal from Ghost in the Sheet. Mr. Michalski's voice is briefly heard in a couple of spots as well. (He sure can make a person's skin crawl...)

TCL's puzzles are fair and logical. Nothing gratuitous is thrown in just to pad the game, and there are no ridiculously difficult puzzles to trip up the player. I was able to complete TCL without any outside help.

I love this game's music. It runs a gamut from grunge to heavy metal to jazz to solo piano; from melancholy to ominous to soothing to rather upbeat. In all cases, it enhances the mood of whatever is taking place.

Throughout the game, choices made by the player influence the story and can lead to at least two different endings. I found both of them poignant and quite moving. Each left me with tears -- the good kind -- streaming down my face. This game really got to me.

Final Thoughts

TCL is relatively short; I estimate it's around 6-8 hours in duration. Considering its intensity, this was certainly enough for me. It also enabled me to do several playthroughs before writing this review to see where different choices might lead.

The game does have some minor flaws. For instance, one NPC's name is spelled two different ways. At times, dialog choices that have been exhausted remain active. There are a few errors in grammar and spelling.

When stacked up against the rest of the game, however, these issues are just trifles. In no way did they interfere with my enjoyment of TCL. On the other hand, my enjoyment of the game was enhanced by the fact that it's DRM-free, and I encountered no bugs.

If you're unsure whether or not you want to tackle TCL, a demo is available on both its official site and its AGS page.

Let me reiterate: The Cat Lady is not for everyone. But if you're an adult fan of psychological horror and powerful storytelling, I can't recommend it enough.

Thank you, Mr. Michalski, for creating this incredible game. The inside of your head must be a fascinating place. I do hope you plan to continue developing games in the future. Nothing, in fact, would please me more.

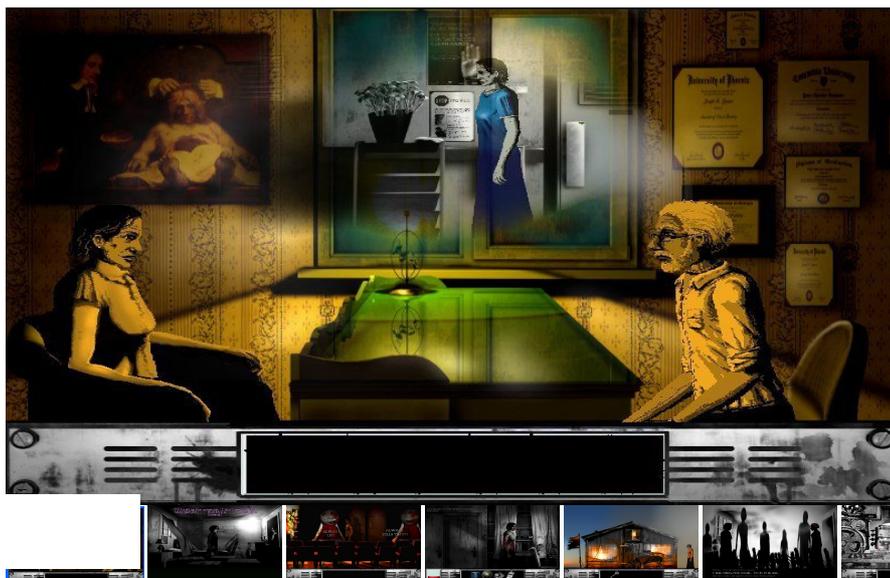
Grade: A+

- + Totally compelling story.
- + First rate voice acting
- A little short, and a few minor flaws



System Requirements:

Microsoft Windows with DirectX 9
 Support for 800x600 resolution
 1.4gb HDD space
 Sound card
 Keyboard



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