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The Lost Art of Fixed Camera Angles

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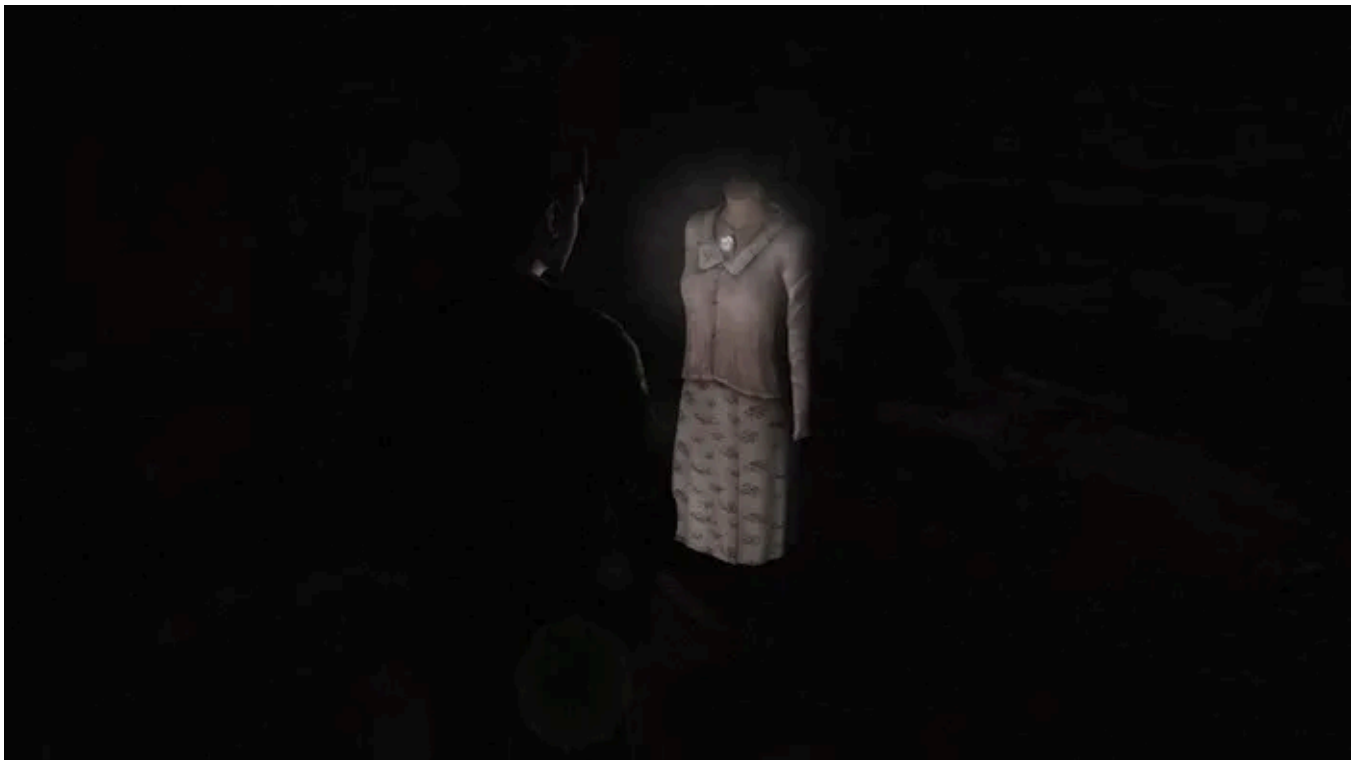
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Screenshot from Silent Hill 2, courtesy of Team Silent and Konami

Within the current video game industry, remakes and remasters have become a dominant part of seasonal releases and are often the most acclaimed releases of the year. With the floodgates being opened via Capcom's remake of the original *Resident Evil 2* in 2019 and *Final Fantasy VII Remake* in 2020, companies and fans have sought remakes of the most iconic games within video game history. Whether it be full-on reimaginings that use the baseline of the original for a wholly different experience, or a faithful remake that takes the original and changes the gameplay to be in line

with current trends, both types have their positives and negatives. One of those aspects that is thought to be a positive is the change in camera angle from the fixed and dynamic camera angles of these originals to the third-person over-the-shoulder dynamic of modern games, with the remake of *Silent Hill 2* being a prime example of such a camera change. What this camera change does, despite the overall faithfulness of the remake, is fundamentally change the way the narrative is represented, even before the changes in the narrative, art direction, and combat. As Gene Park puts it best in [his review of the remake](#), regarding the moment James finds the flashlight:

“In the original game’s cinematography, the player as James discovers a mannequin with a flashlight pointed at them. The framing communicated something important about the story that is now missing. Instead, the player finds a light blinding them through the over-the-shoulder camera perspective that countless games today use.”

This, alongside the remake of *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater*, which also changes the camera to match the later style of *Metal Gear* gameplay, has had me think about the efforts for games to present themselves as more cinematic, and yet fixed camera angles have been able to create incredible cinematic moments that even the most cinematic games of the current industry have yet to capture.

When people think of fixed camera angles, the genre most associated with the camera type is survival horror, and more specifically, the original *Resident Evil*. Though initially intended to use a first-person perspective, series creator Shinji Mikami decided to use fixed camera angles after being directly inspired by *Alone in the Dark*, as well as realizing that a first-person perspective would not mesh well with the original PlayStation’s specs. Though Mikami noted in an interview with Gamespot in 2016 that the team was worried that such a change in perspective would affect immersion, the resulting change allowed the pre-rendered 3D backgrounds to stand out, resulting in the pre-rendered backgrounds of the original trilogy being some of the most visually stunning and artistically impressive environments within gaming. This is equally true for its remake, which decided to use pre-rendered CG movie backgrounds rather than fully 3D polygonal ones, as well as adding a dynamic camera that managed to keep the essence of the fixed viewpoint while also moving with the player to create truly terrifying yet beautiful cinematic moments. In the remake’s case, it still remains arguably the best-looking *Resident Evil* from an art direction standpoint, and some of the best moments of the series are directly due to these camera choices. Walking into the Elder Crimson Heads' tomb, as the game

uses a Dutch angle to emphasize the buildup and tension, or the infamous dog hallway jumpscare, are moments that only work because of the fixed camera angle.

Screenshot of the hallway the Cerberus enemies jumpscare the player in Resident Evil (2003) from [Resident Evil Wiki — Fandom](#), courtesy of Capcom.

Going back to *Silent Hill*, one of the most iconic shots in the entire franchise is the tracking camera as Harry Mason goes down an alleyway that continually decays until he runs into a gruesome display. Such a moment was so masterful in direction that even the adaptation of the game lifts the shot directly from this moment. Other moments, like going up the rusted, spiral staircase, or the framing of the room the player fights Abstract Daddy in *Silent Hill 2*, help add to the sense of degradation and insanity the player experiences, as well as the themes. Horror games that use third-person over-the-shoulder perspectives or are in first person aren't bad, but very few are able to reach the cinematic brilliance that these older games do, and part of that reason is directly due to fixed and dynamic camera angles.

Screenshot from YouTube, original image courtesy of Team Silent and Konami

It might be thought that only horror games have suffered from this lack of fixed camera angles, but so have other genres regarding their cinematic composition, and perhaps the most notable example of this is *God of War*.

To note, this is not saying that the Norse *God of War* duology is bad, as their narratives are well-written and amazingly performed, but Santa Monica's choice to frame the game as a continuous one-shot results in a mixed experience, both in terms of gameplay and presentation. While the third-person perspective and unbroken camera are meant to add to the more upfront emotional and interpersonal narrative, what is lost is the sense of scale and incredible moments present within the original Greek trilogy. Even in the first game, moments like seeing Ares fight in the background heighten how monumental the Olympians are to mortals such as Kratos, while also building up how surmountable a foe Ares will be by the end of the game. Beyond just pure cinematography, due to the chaotic nature of *God of War's* combat, having it outside of the player's control, though seemingly a flaw by current industry standards, helps to give the player a sense of direction and allows them to see all attacks and gameplay without having to worry about redirecting to see attacks off screen, something the Norse trilogy has to compensate via having attack indicators and companions warning Kratos of attacks behind him.

This choice for the original trilogy would further become a defining aspect of its gameplay and storytelling with each subsequent entry. *God of War 2* shows this right

off the bat with the battle against the Colossus of Rhodes, with the utter hellscape of Sparta enforced by the size and power of the Colossus, while again reinforcing Kratos' size difference, which makes defeating it even more monumental. Even outside of the chaotic and brutal combat encounters, the game shows how it can manage scale to great effect with moments like traversing across the Steeds of Time. The camera work here is nothing short of phenomenal, having moments of keeping Kratos out of focus to further emphasize the scope of these mythological creatures. This continues throughout the entire game until it reaches its peak in the fight against the Sisters of Fate, where Kratos fights them atop the same sword he uses to kill Ares from the first game as his past self and the former God of War fight in the background, creating an unforgettable encounter.

Somehow, *God of War III* manages to surpass all of these moments and is one of, if not the most, cinematically impressive action games of all time, and it does all of this in the first ten minutes alone. The frenetic action of the trilogy comes in full force as the camera zips around Kratos fighting on top of the Titan Gaia as both of them fend off Poseidon and the forces of Olympus. Choosing to stand by the fixed camera angles and innovate, rather than switching to a player-controlled camera, resulted in Santa Monica being able to fully show off the scale and epicness of the Greek Pantheon in a way that has yet to be matched, even in film. Cronos is the prime proof of this, as the emphasis on Cronos over Kratos in terms of camera, as well as Kratos being shown to be as small as an ant, makes the eldest of the Titans appear to be as insurmountable as he should be, which makes Kratos' eventual triumph even more grandiose.

Unfortunately, in terms of the AAA gaming industry and playerbase, such cinematic choices with fixed camera angles have been seen as outdated and inherently flawed. (which is a notable reason people are asking for remakes of games with fixed camera angles initially) The release of *Resident Evil 4* and its choice of third-person over-the-shoulder gameplay is perhaps the most innovative design decision of the 21st century, but the cost is that it has now been seen as the standard for the industry. Even around the time, games like the original release of *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* were criticized for its camera choices by both players and review outlets such as IGN, resulting in the *Subsistence* release of the game adding a third-person camera angle similar to the industry standard at the time. This camera choice, however, ends up changing and, to some extent, ruining much of the cinematic choices present within the game. So much of the level design and atmosphere is tailored around the overhead camera, and as such, a lot of that purposeful design is lost when changing the camera. The Shagohad chase near the finale is proof of why the newer camera angle can disrupt the cinematic essence of the game, as the original release's camera angles portray the chase as an incredible thrill, showing Kojima's understanding of what makes great action. Without it, the segment loses so much of its intensity.

Similarly, in the case of video game remakes, the original two *Yakuza*'s fixed camera angles and composition are also lost in their respective *Kiwami* remakes. Kiryu's framing in Kamurocho within the original release gives a larger-than-life sense of scale to the city, with the extra NPC's feeling not only alive, but making the player feel further immersed within its streets and setting. *Yakuza Kiwami* instead opted to lift its camera and much of its design from the prequel release *Yakuza 0*, and the resulting camera choice makes Kamurocho seem smaller in scale than it did in its original release. Of course, the original games had to choose these camera angles for loading purposes, but as is the case with multiple older games, it is these limitations that often allow for the developers to find workarounds that make the game better and show more innovation and unique design in comparison to homogenization that is arguably expected of video games nowadays.

Screenshot from Siliconera, courtesy of SEGA and Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio

With these examples in mind, it is clear that fixed camera angles have become somewhat of a lost art within video games. Although newer experiences strive to be cinematic and emulate film, very few of them have been able to fully stand out the way fixed camera angles do. Performances and motion capture have been a notable innovation, but many modern releases have uninteresting camerawork both in cutscenes and in gameplay. What fixed camera angles of the past understood is that the best cinematic composition is vibrant, experimental, and constantly engaging the audience with their narratives and experience in unique and grandiose ways that stick with the audience. Though many will see newer releases and remakes of older games as automatically better because of higher graphical fidelity and removing fixed camera angles, it is arguable that video games were actually at their most cinematic when developers understood that, like a movie director, the best person to control the camera is more often than not themselves, not the player.

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What are your thoughts?



Wes O'Donnell



1 day ago



Good read, thanks for writing. I remember my very first play through of Resident Evil in the 1990s. The frozen camera really bothered me at the time but eventually grew on me. It's interesting to read how this has influenced later titles. Cheers



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