

# ARE YOU SURE THE ONLY YOU IS YOU?

by esther rosenfield

*P.T.* isn't a complicated game. Created by game director Hideo Kojima and film director Guillermo del Toro as a short "Playable Teaser" for their upcoming collaboration on a new installment in the *Silent Hill* series, it takes place entirely in a hallway on the first floor of a house. From a first-person perspective, the player navigates the hallway, walking straight ahead and then around a 90-degree corner on the right, solving a puzzle that unlocks the door at the end which takes them back to the beginning of the same hallway. All the while, a terrifying ghost of a murdered woman who seems to be named Lisa stalks the player, attacking if they make the wrong move. *P.T.* is terrifying in its simplicity, twisting its spare setting into increasingly surreal and chilling tableaux of violence, madness, and tragedy. In one scene, the player hears a monologue that emanates from a bloody paper bag, describing the experience of walking endlessly forward until it encountered another version of itself walking just ahead of it. "The only me is me," the bag gravely intones. "Are you sure the only you is you?"

But much like the vengeful ghost at the center of its story, *P.T.* was killed prematurely. Kojima had a falling out with his longtime employer Konami and his *Silent Hill* project was cancelled. The breakup was apparently so acrimonious, though, that Konami took the extra step of removing *P.T.* from the PlayStation digital storefront where it had been available as a free download, and went even further by preventing players who downloaded it from ever re-downloading it if the game was deleted from their console. The game only exists now on a handful of hard drives in obsolete pieces of hardware. If every one of those PlayStations broke down, *P.T.* would be gone forever.

Well, in a sense, anyway. Despite just being a teaser, the game was critically lauded, quickly becoming an important and influential work in its genre. *P.T.* is preserved in the games it influenced, some of which take that inspiration so far that they may be considered deliberate attempts at archival practice. The earliest example, *Allison Road*, made no attempt to hide this fact. The game (which was pitched on Kickstarter but never finished) featured a first-person view of a character wandering a haunted house at night, stalked by a furious ghost. Pre-release footage shows the house's messy decor and dim, beige lighting, which imitate the atmosphere of *P.T.* startlingly well. *Allison Road*'s ghost, a dark-haired woman in a bloody white nightgown, could be Lisa's sister. Had *P.T.* not been deleted, it would have been easy to dismiss *Allison Road* as a knock-off. Instead, it comes across as a genuine attempt to preserve the experience of playing a game which was made permanently inaccessible.

Though *Allison Road* never saw release, there are countless examples of *P.T.* clones that have in the years since its 2014 release and subsequent deletion. *Once Upon a Time* has all the hallmarks (the dark suburban setting, the paranormal antagonist, the style of gameplay) but trades ghosts for aliens. *The Sinner (Prologue)* was taken down due to copyright violation after it was discovered its developers directly stole assets from, among other games, entries in the *Silent Hill* series. *Layers of Fear* and *Penumbra: The Blackened* are *P.T.* period pieces, taking place respectively in the 1920s and during World War II. Another game, *Visage*, might be the first *P.T.* clone to be explicit about that fact. The game's level designer, Jonathan Vallieres, said the team's goal was to "make a psychological horror game to help fill the void left by this cancelled game that everyone had wanted to play so bad." Whether or not these games succeed in filling that void is a matter of personal opinion.

Nevertheless, it's clear that these games are doing something more than riding a trendy subgenre. These are works of preservation, not of an original piece of art but of the experience it provided. The only *P.T.* is *P.T.*, as the bloody bag might say. But as these games show, maybe there could be another one, walking just ahead of it.

images (top to bottom)

*P.T.* (2014)

*Allison Road* (2016 prototype)

*Visage* (2020)