APPROACHING THE GENRE

Match Made in Hell: The Inevitable Success of the Horror Genre in Video Games

Richard Rouse III

Games have inhabited the horror genre for almost as long as they’ve been in existence. Going back to the text-only interactive fiction game Zork (Marc Blank and Dave Lebling, 1980) (which, granted, most would call a fantasy game, not a horror game), a significant portion of the game involved players stumbling around in a dark cave system, hideously afraid of being eaten by a Grue, a terrifying situation no player had ever experience before. Indeed, this was a new type of horror, because death would no longer be something happening to someone else, but instead to you, the player. Any chance of redemption and eventual success would involve you facing down death again and again and somehow, finally, emerging victorious.

The horror games kept going from there, from one of the first graphical adventures Mystery House (Roberta Williams and Ken Williams, 1980), to the more overt horror of Infocom’s The Lurking Horror (Dave Lebling, 1987), to the horror parody of Maniac Mansion (Ron Gilbert, 1987), to Alone in the Dark (Frédérick Raynal, 1992), to Resident Evil (Shinji Mikami, 1996), to Silent Hill (Keiichiro Toyama, 1999), to F.E.A.R.: First Encounter Assault Recon (Craig Hubbard, 2005), to Dead Space (Brett Robbins, 2008). It isn’t by accident that so many games have found success in the horror setting. The goals of video games and the goals of horror fiction directly overlap, making them ideal bedfellows. Indeed, when I started out designing and writing the action horror game The Suffering (2004), I didn’t yet realize just how useful the conventions of horror could be to the inherently constrained and un-realistic world of a video game. By the end of development on the first game and through production of the game’s sequel, The Suffering: Ties That Bind (2005), we pulled out every horror trope we could that also matched our game design goals, while avoiding techniques that were too cinematic or fundamentally non-interactive.
The horror genre embraces disturbing content and twisted subject matter. This material inherently limits the potential audience, as the mass-market gamers who pick up the squeaky-clean space opera of *Halo: Combat Evolved* (Jason Jones, 2001) or the amusing, virtual dollhouse of *The Sims* (Will Wright, 2000) don’t want anything to do with warped nightmares or wading through lakes of blood. Yes the marriage of horror and games just seems too perfect for designers to avoid. And still, there’s also a lot of room to continue to evolve the horror game, to move it away from just emulating horror in other media, and instead, to employ the genre to explore the dark corners of humanity in ways that no other medium can.

**Practical Considerations**

Suspense-driven horror films have long focused on life and death struggles against a world gone mad, with protagonists facing powerful adversaries who are purely evil. One need only look at film examples from *Nosferatu* (F.W. Murnau, 1922), *The Thing from Another World* (Christian Nyby and Howard Hawks, 1951), *Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968), *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979) and *Ringu* (Hideo Nakata, 1998) to observe this dynamic at work. These are not films where the evil presence is explained extensively, if at all. Through its actions, this antagonistic force shows itself to be so thoroughly inhuman that no audience member would fault the hero for killing the evil as an act of self-defense. This exactly maps to the experience most action-oriented designers want to create, going all the way back to *Space Invaders*; the player is thrown into a dangerous situation with a clear, undeniable “kill to survive” motivation. The evil forces are numerous and all deserve to die. Hence horror games are a natural fit. Indeed, many games that few would describe as “horror” use variations on those same horror tropes to justify the action in their world (among the many examples, see *DOOM* [Sandy Peterson, John Romero and Tom Hall, 1993], *System Shock* [Doug Church, 1994], and *Half-Life* [Gabe Newell et al., 1998]).

Game storytelling works best when the plot is fairly simple. A lot of nuance can be worked into the environment and the characters the player meets, but the plot is something that needs to be immediately understood and which propels the player through the whole game experience, motivating the actions and choices they’re making. Since horror works best the less that is explained and the more that is left up to the imagination, it maps well to game storytelling. In *The Suffering*, I wanted to keep the cut-scenes to a minimum to keep the player in the game as much as possible. With a minimum of “forced” storytelling moments, we had to keep our high level plot understandable without much exposition. As a result, we buried a lot of our
back-story in subtle storytelling sections involving dialog played over gameplay, graffiti written on walls, very quick semi-animated flashbacks, and cryptic journal entries the player could unlock. This enabled us to keep the story mysterious enough that the player would still be left with numerous unanswered questions. My hope was that the player would fill in the blanks with his own imagination (see Rouse, 2004). One need only look at horror films like The Birds (Alfred Hitchcock, 1963), The Shining (Stanley Kubrick, 1980), and The Blair Witch Project (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 1999) or some of the best horror writing by Lovecraft or Poe to see that the plot of these works is quite simple, the explanation minimal, and what does happen is barely explained, if explained at all. In horror, the way the audience fills in the blanks will be far more disturbing than anything a writer could possibly come up with. Thus, minimalist game storytelling fits perfectly in the horror genre.

Horror is also ideal for games because it presents a familiar world but with enough of a twist to make it seem fantastic and special. Horror stories are typically set in highly recognizable locations that players can identify but which have been invaded by some evil force. This force has often altered the rules of the world in some way. Thus, horror can be used to introduce unique gameplay mechanics based on this altered reality. Military shooters or open world crime games, set in very recognizable spaces, will always feel pretty similar to each other purely on the level of mechanics, due to the realistic enemy combatants and weaponry at the player’s disposal. A horror game can introduce a supernatural element which justifies why the player has unique abilities, why he is hearing the thoughts of others, why bizarre enemies can materialize out of nowhere, and so forth. Yet the familiar setting of horror fiction keeps the player grounded. This is in contrast to the fantasy and science fiction settings popular in so many games. These more fantastic settings allow for unique mechanics but only let them exist in worlds which are inherently foreign to players. One game that both succeeded and failed on this front was the horror-influenced Half-Life. Set in the recognizable Black Mesa research facility for the majority of the game, the player spends his time fighting bizarre creatures in this familiar space; it’s a very tense and fictionally cohesive experience. In the last quarter of the game, the player travels to the home-world of the aliens, a bizarre space unlike anything the player has seen before. It was at this point that most players felt the game went a bit off the rails and lost the delicate balance of the familiar and the alien that had been present in the beginning of the game.

Even the best simulated game never comes close to feeling like the real world. Even Grand Theft Auto IV (Leslie Benzies et al., 2008) and Assassin’s Creed (Patrice Désilets, 2007), which have arguably come the closest to making the player feel like they are in a true “living, breathing” world, fall short
of feeling all that real as soon as one stops to look at them. It’s pretty obvious that characters are running on artificial intelligence (AI), no matter how sophisticated. Indeed, the more realistic their behavior and appearance become, the more the perilous “uncanny valley” takes over the experience. This sort of “slightly off” world is ideally suited to the uneasiness of a horror setting. Often people joke that games feel like they’re populated by zombies, so why not embrace that? *Dead Rising* (Yoshinori Kawano, 2006) had an excellent simulation of a world filled with zombies, probably indistinguishable from a real shopping mall filled with the undead. The more “human” characters found in *Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth* (Christopher Gray and Simon Woodroffe, 2005) feel zombie-like, but that AI limitation is understandable, given that the town of Innsmouth is supposed to be in the thrall of The Green Sticky Spawn of the Stars. The weird artificiality of game worlds plays directly into the brand of creepiness that the horror genre thrives on.

Finally, it is also convenient that horror tends to draw a younger and more male audience than other fictional settings. Historically, the people who are most interested in the horror setting are also the people who spend a lot of time playing video games. This simple market reality helps keep the horror genre financially viable and subsequent horror games inevitable.

**Game Mechanics**

A popular game design device is to give players some information about their surroundings, while leaving a lot out. This again is a natural fit for the horror genre. Protagonists in slasher films are never sure where an enemy is or when the next attack is going to come. Being completely blind-sided isn’t a lot of fun though, so a number of horror games have used limited information techniques to keep the player apprised that danger is imminent without “giving away” too much. In *Silent Hill 2* (Masashi Tsuboyama, 2001), the player finds a radio which generates static whenever a creature is near. This doesn’t tell where exactly it is or what type of enemy it might be, but serves to warn the player and helps build tension in the process. The film *Aliens* (James Cameron, 1986) was famous for its use of the motion detector, which provided a bit more information than the *Silent Hill 2* radio static. This device naturally showed up in the *Aliens vs. Predator* (various) games, and before that in Bungie’s first-person shooter *Marathon* (Jason Jones, 1994) (which itself featured a number of levels that felt distinctly horror-inspired). This device only shows enemies that are currently moving, and has the disadvantage of not communicating where they are vertically. With a sufficiently com-
plex “over and under” environment (as was found in Marathon) this forces
the player to both carefully monitor the detector but also to make choices
based on erratic information, creating a much more tense experience in the
process.

Much classic horror fiction deals with a fear of the dark. Darkness is
great for technologically constrained games, because a lot of darkness means
the game doesn’t have to render everything for great distances in all direc-
tions. Stephen King’s story The Mist (1980) and John Carpenter’s film The
Fog (1980) are ideal set-ups for a game, particularly when one considers how
much cheaper rendering fog is than showing a long, detailed vista. The fog
or mist means the player cannot see very far and also allows creatures to get
up really close to him before attacking while tidily providing a fictional jus-
tification for where they’re coming from. And of course this very device was
used in numerous Silent Hill games. Interestingly, as game graphics have
become higher fidelity, what designers can do with them has become more
limited. For instance, look at the original DOOM games. The games were
capable of rendering large areas filled with many enemies (which were all
sprites in a 3D world, hence fairly cheap to put on the screen). For the more
modern DOOM 3 (Tim Willits, 2005), the engine technology had come much
farther and was capable of rendering highly detailed characters with complex
lighting. The drawback was that it wasn’t capable of showing that many of
them and the advanced lighting was expensive enough that it forced more lim-
ited play spaces. Hence, the game took a significantly more horror direction,
with fewer, tougher enemies leaping out of nearby shadows, instead of the
giant battlefields packed with millions of creatures. The horror theme was a
perfect match for these new mechanics and the new technology.

Various horror scenarios are also ideal for limiting where the player can
go. When using a real world environment, it’s nice to have a good reason why
someone can’t just leave town or run to the police, beyond just saying “you
can’t do that.” It can be quite convenient if the player has some sort of psy-
chic disorder that prevents them from leaving. This is easily done in a hor-
ror setting, as is the handy thick mist which has descended around the town,
filled with tentacled beasts sure to rip a player limb from limb if they enter
into this mist. Mysterious “voices” in the player’s head can also provide the
player with direction or just deliver back-story in an inexpensive fashion.
Silent Hill 4: The Room (Suguru Murakoshi, 2004), which contains perhaps
the most confining primary space ever seen in a narrative video game, places
mysterious chains on the door with only the shadiest of justifications. If
the player tries to open one of the windows, it is explained that his night-
mares have made him fearful of opening them. The player would never buy
this in a military or crime game, but in a horror setting it is immediately
accepted.
Emotional Response

Beyond the practical benefits of the horror genre for game designers, the horror genre manipulates certain key emotions, which happen to be the same emotional responses games specialize in. For the February 2001 issue of SIGGRAPH Computer Graphics I wrote an essay, titled “Games on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown: Emotional Content in Computer Games,” where I noted that games are good at eliciting certain emotions and less effective at others. I encouraged game designers to exploit this potential as much as possible, instead of trying to mimic other genres and the emotions they do well. As it happens, many of those key “game” emotions are also ones ideally suited to the horror genre.

Two of the most obvious of these emotions, in both games and films, are tension and fear. Games provoke these better than other media because there’s actually something at stake for the player. In any non-interactive media, the audience is seeing unfortunate events or life-threatening occurrences happen for another person, and the audience’s own tension is only possible through empathy with that character’s plight. In an immersive game, the player actually projects himself into the experience. The most extreme example of this is a near-miss projectile in a first-person shooter, which may actually cause someone to shift to one side in their seat while they play. With the player fully immersing himself in the world, fear becomes much more intense. Furthermore, in games one can fail, often through their avatar dying. Death means the player will have to replay a section of the game in order to progress, giving death real stakes, unlike a movie, where the plot will keep going no matter who dies.

Another key emotional response that games are good at evoking is pride. This is an emotion other media can’t really muster at all. Though there’s some bragging rights to be had by saying “I survived a viewing of The Texas Chain Saw Massacre,” few would argue that it’s the same as emerging victorious in a game. In a horror setting, where the player is typically ill equipped and facing nearly-insurmountable and profoundly evil challenges, surviving the situation is all the more meaningful. There’s also something about helping other people in the world that makes it a common theme in horror games. When someone asks you directly for help and you are able to solve their problem while saving them from certain death, a very real sense of accomplishment follows. Certainly, no other media provides that sort of direct satisfaction to the audience.

Games are also great at allowing players to experience taboo subject matter in a safe environment. Audiences go to see thrillers for a reason: their lives typically aren’t that thrilling or perilous, and movies give them a vicarious thrill. The thrill in a game is less vicarious and more direct, though of
course the player is still ultimately safe. The adversaries in a horror game can be dark and twisted, in the best cases evoking real-world horrors that most players would typically not think about, further emphasizing the horror of the experience. For instance, in *The Suffering* games, I deliberately themed all of the enemy creatures after different methods of human execution, because capital punishment is inherently creepy and unsettling, and because most people, even those who are pro death penalty, prefer not to think of the specific realities of execution techniques (figures 1 and 2). Emphasizing this taboo topic forced players to face it, without actually making them attend an execution.

**Immersion and Empowerment**

One of the biggest advantages games have over other media is how immersive a gaming experience can be. Since players are, to some extent, able to determine the actions of the main character, while playing a game they project themselves into the main character much more than in any other medium. This is especially true in first-person games, where immersion is undeniably one of the primary goals. But even in third-person camera games,
player is forced to watch this bizarre enemy up close for the first time without being able to do anything to stop him. The creature design is brilliant and as a movie scene it’s plenty scary, but in the end it’s just a cut-scene. As soon as a cut-scene starts, the player’s level of engagement in the game drops, and many players will put the controller down entirely, almost completely disengaging from the game.

Similar creature introductions, in a cut-scene free game like *Half-Life*, may place the player in just as little jeopardy (none), but since the player is in control the entire time they can’t be sure they’re ever completely safe. Without actually killing the player, the game can very effectively present the illusion of true jeopardy. The player has no way of knowing if the hideous creature may finally break through the glass, creating a situation where they’ll need to immediately do something to fight back. Games like *Half-Life* and the recent *Left 4 Dead* (Mike Booth, 2008) give players a good number of choices about how they play, yet are still highly scripted experiences that funnel the player through spaces that give the illusion of being open, but which are typically quite linear. AI-driven events are mixed with highly scripted encounters. But with the same amount of linearity and scripting, a game that leaves the player in control of the camera feels more immersive than one where the camera control is constantly taken away. The perfect framing of a shot may be lost, and even with the most meticulous planning, there’s always the chance a player may be looking away at the wrong time and miss a critical event. But what’s gained in immersion and the feeling of potential threat more than makes up for these shortcomings, transforming what could have been simply a well-implemented cinematic moment into a still-compelling and distinctly interactivity-focused moment.

Despite some exceptions (notably Square Soft games), the trend over the last decade has been to add shorter and more seamless cut-scenes, with some games such as *Half-Life*, *BioShock* (Ken Levine, 2007) and *Dead Space* eschewing them almost entirely. *Resident Evil 4* introduced the notion of keeping the player immersed in the cut-scenes by adding very limited interaction to them. At key moments, players would need to hit a button to make their character swing a knife at just the right instant to stop a potentially fatal attack. Though this minimal interaction kept players on edge, it did nothing to make them feel truly empowered, creating a *Space Ace* (Rick Dyer and Don Bluth, 1994)-esque experience which had the potential to be frustrating in its own right. However, these barely-interactive cut-scenes were very well executed and quite thrilling, thus representing an interesting evolution of the cut-scene.

In *The Suffering*, we had a specific story to convey, but we didn’t want storytelling to get in the way of our core game experience with excessive cut-scenes. With immersion as a core design principle, we had a rule of thumb
that cut-scenes were to be used exclusively for short, pivotal story points or for intensely scary scenes. Furthermore, we wanted to keep the player character (Torque)’s actions fairly neutral during these scenes to avoid negating the player’s feeling that they were fully in control of Torque at all times. As I mentioned earlier, this meant we kept our plot quite simple, and integrated a lot of our storytelling into the game-world itself.

The Bright Future of the Blackest Night

With all the ways in which games are the ideal medium for the horror genre, it seems we gamers will be playing them for a while to come. But what form will they take in the future? I’ve never been one to make far reaching predictions, but it seems there is ample room for growth. A lot of the non-game horror examples I’ve referenced in this essay have been examples from movies, which makes sense since most horror games have taken films as their primary source of inspiration. But as horror games continue to evolve, I suspect they will become more and more distinct from horror films, in the same way horror films have progressed beyond being straight adaptations of horror prose. In my opinion that is a good thing. Consider the interesting case of H.P. Lovecraft adaptations. One might conclude that his work has fared better as games than it ever has on film. This is true for the classic pen and paper game Call of Cthulhu (Sandy Peterson, 1981) and the recent Dark Corners of the Earth console game, as well as the Cthulhu-inspired Eternal Darkness: Sanity’s Requiem (Denis Dyack, 2002). It would seem that Lovecraft’s unique brand of unease, insanity, and slow paced terror works better in an interactive space than it ever can as a movie. As the horror game keeps evolving, more such cases will emerge, to the point where games that borrow too much from films will start to look dated. The future for horror games is bright indeed, and the sooner developers embrace what makes them unique, the better.

Works Cited

Games of Fear: A Multi-Faceted Historical Account of the Horror Genre in Video Games

Carl Therrien

Long before the introduction of the gothic novel, the playful evocation of fear and dread in the audience had been a central component in a great variety of legends and folktales. Succubus, incubus, imps, and harpies populate medieval imaginary; an impressive bestiary permeates literature, the visual arts, and reality to a large extent. As reason theoretically superseded those “dark ages,” the Enlightenment saw the rise of the phantasmagoria show, delighting audiences with a variety of effects (building on magic lantern expertise) that sought to represent otherworldly apparitions. Cultural artifacts associated with horror fiction, from the gothic masterpieces of Shelley and Stoker, the stories of Maupassant, to the contemporary slasher movie series, have received a lot of academic attention. Still lacking from these accounts, however, is the contribution of a medium that, like the horror genre itself, has been seen mostly as popular fare: video games. This essay proposes to shed light on the contribution of gaming culture through a general historical overview of horror games. Faced with the necessity of delineating a historical corpus, the lingering problem of genre definition naturally emerges. Scholars frequently disagree on the constitutive features of horror literature and cinema; the interactive medium adds a whole layer of structural elements that can potentially be integrated in genre definitions, adding to the confusion in many ways. Rather than producing another attempt at refining the existing definitions, this essay puts forth the various conceptions of horror fiction and presents examples of video games that correspond to each of these conceptions. Rereading the evolution of the genre from thematic specifications to presentation and gameplay mechanics, it seeks to pave up the way for a multi-faceted, non-linear historical account of the phenomenon.
matic specification” of a broader genre (Genette), or through a biological metaphor (the detective novel being a “species” of the genre known as the novel). Needless to say, horror fiction has been thoroughly discussed at the thematic level. Elements such as scary animals, supernatural beings and otherworldly manifestations are put forth, most often hinting at a clear intention to incite fear in the user.7

H. P. Lovecraft has notoriously insisted on the fearful experience of the reader in order to define horror and fantastic literature (Todorov, 1973: 34). Many contemporary commentators would agree with Isabel Pinedo that horror fiction, at its core, is a “bounded experience of fear” (Perron, 2005). However, Todorov rejected this point of view most clearly: if the feeling of fear becomes a defining criterion, then “we should have to conclude that a work’s genre depends on the sang-froid of its reader” (1973: 35). The author acknowledges the primary function of the fantastic elements in this type of literature: to incite fear, horror, or curiosity in the reader, in a specific way that can’t be reproduced by other genres (1973: 92). However, in his conception still influenced by structuralism, literature is an autonomous system closed on itself; the actual reader of the text and the emotions experienced are not the object of literary studies. Nonetheless, the reader, understood as a mere function of the text, is central to Todorov’s definition:

... in the universe evoked by the text, an event — an action — occurs which proceeds from the supernatural (or from the pseudo-supernatural); this action then provokes a reaction in the implicit reader (and generally in the hero of the story). It is this reaction which we describe as “hesitation,” and the texts which generate it, as fantastic [1973: 103].

Through narration, fantastic literature constantly stresses a hesitation between two potential explanations: a naturalistic one, and a supernatural one. The genre appears to be staging the real-world fear associated with the unknown. Evoking a psychological response from the reader is certainly not as problematic today as it would have been when Todorov wrote his seminal essay. The hesitation of the implicit reader most likely translates into a diffuse apprehension — the least intense level of fear on Robert Plutchik’s scale of fear — for the actual reader.8 It also evokes the slower build up of tension that Will Rockett labeled “terror” in a study about the “cinema of cruelty”; the author clearly opposes horror and terror based on the actual perception of a threatening element (horror) versus the anticipation of such an encounter and the lingering anxiety that it supposes (referred in Perron, 2004).

Todorov locates fantastic literature in the middle of a continuum of genres ranging from the purely uncanny — where exceptional events can still be explained through common laws — and the purely marvelous — where the supernatural elements have become accepted as natural. Horror in its most striking form, for the author, clearly falls on the side of the uncanny (1973:
47); he evokes the stories of Ambrose Bierce, renowned for their gruesome depiction of war. The source of dread is striking yet completely rational, thus minimal doubt or hesitation arises. This association is consistent with slasher movies such as the original Friday the 13th (Cunningham, 1980) and The Texas Chain Saw Massacre (Hooper, 1974). However, it seems to contradict the common association between horror and “supernatural” evil creatures. The very existence of monstrous figures—werewolves, vampires, zombies, aliens, etc.—or the reality of supernatural manifestations can be clearly acknowledged early on in many stories deemed horrific in nature. The potential vivid imagination of a protagonist or a trickery of the senses are not brought up in Alien (Scott, 1979) or Village of the Damned (Carpenter, 1995); no hesitation arises about the extraordinary events, and thus this type of horror would fall under the “marvelous” category for Todorov. By contrast, Noël Carroll’s seminal work on horror fiction (The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart, 1990) focuses entirely on the theme of monstrosity to define horror fiction, and in doing so, excludes the previous examples relating to the purely uncanny. There is obvious common ground between Todorov’s connection with the uncanny and Carroll’s insistence on monstrosity: both appear to associate horror with revulsion. But to complicate matters even more, fictions that don’t integrate repulsive elements but instead rely on hesitation—the defining criterion of fantastic literature—to instigate fear have also been labeled “horror” (The Blair Witch Project, Myrick & Sánchez, 1999).

It is now obvious that disagreements on the thematic elements that define horror fiction and its effects generate a great deal of confusion. The same confusion exists in the realm of video games: many famous games can be associated with the uncanny, marvelous and fantastic versions of horror. It is unclear just how supernatural the bats and tarantulas of Haunted House (Atari, 1981) really are—the proportions at this early stage of visual development being impossible to read—but at least one element of this alleged first horror game puts it under the “marvelous” category. The back-cover of the retail box clears-up any potential ambiguity about the white collection of pixels moving on the screen: “Ghosts. Bats. Tarantulas. One-Player Game” (emphasis mine). In The Lurking Horror (Infocom, 1987), a seminal text-adventure game, one of the first otherworldly manifestations occurs when the player reaches the higher structure of the great dome in the aeronautical engineering building: “[a] single, bright-blue eye opens in the squishy mass, and the tentacle (for that’s what it is) retracts” (emphasis mine). Similarly, no hesitation arises in the Castlevania series (Konami) or in Diablo (Blizzard, 1997), where dozens of different hell minions hinder players on their quest to destruct the ultimate source of evil. The three Edgar Allan Poe stories adapted in The Dark Eye (Inscape, 1995) focus on sordid tales of murder and malevolence. Much like its source material, the game falls into the category of the
uncanny. The same could be observed about the *Jack the Ripper* games (St. Bride’s School, 1987; Intergalactic Development, 1994; Galiléa, 2004), based on the famous unsolved murder mystery. Even though most publications simply labeled them “adventure games,” further inspection of the promotional material and editorial reviews indicate the horror connection.\(^{11}\) The original *Clock Tower* (Human Entertainment, 1995, Super Famicom) is clearly inspired by the *slasher* movie breed of uncanny, while some supernatural elements permeate later games in the series.

As is true for horror cinema, games that rely on the fantastic effect until the end are few and far between. In *Phantasmagoria* (Sierra On-Line, 1995), many plot devices and themes seek to instigate a sense of doubt about what might really be happening. Since moving into a new luxurious mansion with her loving husband, Adrienne has been experiencing a series of horrific nightmares. This classic framing device can trigger a skeptical attitude (for it could be only a dream)\(^ {12}\) and points towards the potential psychological instability of the protagonist. The couple’s new house once belonged to a famous magician, Zoltan Carnovasch (Carno), and many other elements are related to the trickery of the senses (not the least of which is the title of the game). However, as her husband becomes increasingly aggressive, and as ghostly apparitions multiply, the supernatural explanation clearly prevails. At various points in *Condemned: Criminal Origins* (Monolith, 2005), indistinctively during interactive segments or cut-scenes, the protagonist is subjected to nightmarish visions that appear to be hallucinations. At the beginning of chapter five, the introductory cut-scene shows Ethan Thomas alone in public transit; when he is attacked by a strange creature, Ethan “wakes up” and ponders “Maybe I’ve gone crazy.” Similar devices have been used in the *Gabriel Knight* series (Sierra On-Line) and in *Dark Seed* (Cyberdreams, 1992). The *Silent Hill* series (Konami) is probably the most relevant example of the fantastic effect in the realm of video games. Even though the creatures you encounter in town can kill your avatar, leading to an actual “game over” screen, the reality of the events depicted is not clearly established. Without warning or explanations, the player is frequently transported to a nightmarish version of the locales. Protagonists sometimes express disbelief; after the first visit to this darker realm, Harry (the avatar in the first game) wakes up in a café and wonders out loud “Was I dreaming?” As the player completely uncovers the background story of James Sunderland at the end of *Silent Hill 2* (Konami, 2001), it appears that the character has been caught in some sort of psychological hell. Yet the continuity of the setting from one game to the next seems to indicate that Silent Hill could be a very real place where lost souls go to wander.

Todorov’s typology of genres has been used as a pretext to dive in the world of horror video games. One could argue, however, that generic models designed to study literature or cinema are not completely relevant in
understanding the medium. In “Genre and Game Studies: Toward a Critical Approach to Video Game Genres,” Thomas Apperley has made a strong case against the remediation of existing generic labels and urged researchers to focus on interactivity to develop video game genre studies.13 Generic labels referring specifically to gameplay elements do exist, and it is interesting to note that horror-themed games have emerged in a great variety of ludic genres: side-scrolling action games (Castlevania and Akumajo Dracula X: Chi No Rondo, Konami, 1986/1993; Alien Storm, Sega, 1990; the Splatterhouse series, Namco); shooting galleries (The House of the Dead series, Sega; Space Gun, Taito, 1990; Corpse Killer, Digital Pictures, 1994) and first-person shooters (Blood, Monolith, 1997; Clive Barker’s Undying, Dreamworks Interactive, 2001); fighting games (the Mortal Kombat series, Midway); text-adventures (The Lurking Horror) and point-and-click adventure games (I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream, Cyberdreams, 1994; Call of Cthulhu: Shadow of the Comet, Chaosium, 1993); role-playing games (Diablo; Parasite Eve, Square, 1998) and at least one MMORPG (Requiem: Bloodymare, Gravity, 2007); even some racing/vehicular combat games (Carmageddon, Stainless Software, 1997; Twisted Metal Black, Incognito, 2001) and strategy games (the Dungeon Keeper series by Bullfrog) make use of horror themes. However, when Capcom released Resident Evil in 1996, a new generic label was quickly embraced by the gaming community; the infamous intro screen read: “Welcome to the world of survival horror.”

In the context of video game studies, where broad theoretical efforts are still far more common than specific studies of games or genres, survival horror games have clearly attracted more attention than other genres (if one excludes the sociological focus on MMORPGs). Since the label emerged specifically to describe a type of video game, it might seem paradoxical that its definitions rely heavily on formal traits which actually restrict the typical gameplay experience. Bernard Perron observed that “the survival horror genre might be the game genre most often compared to film” (2005). In another contribution, he studied how scare tactics in these games often build on cinematographic expertise: point of view restrictions (third-person perspective, fixed camera angles) and editing effects (rapid change of camera angles) seek to accentuate startle effects (2004). Similarly, Jay McRoy declares that survival horror games “are ‘viewed’ primarily from a third-person perspective framed in high-angle long shots intended to intensify the sensation of vulnerability, isolation, and, in certain ‘key’ moments, shock” (2006). McRoy also underlines the importance of cut-scenes in the genre, following an extensive study by Tanya Krzywinska. For Krzywinska, the succession of gameplay segments and non-interactive cut-scenes, between self-determination and pre-determination, is particularly suited to the experience of horror, for it “ties into and consolidates formally a theme often found in horror, in which
supernatural forces act on, and regularly threaten, the sphere of human agency” (2002: 207).

Video game creators’ fascination for cinema has played a decisive role in shaping the general evolution of the medium, yet the connection does seem even more palpable in the case of horror games. It goes much beyond the simple commercial synergy one can already observe in the adaptations of classics such as The Texas Chain Saw Massacre, Halloween (both by VSS, 1983) or Friday the 13th (Domark, 1985). After just a few generations of hardware, horror video games tried to recreate the same visceral revulsion, subtle moods, and other strategies that cinema had achieved. When one of your friends is about to be brutally murdered in Friday the 13th, a gloomy piece of music forewarns of the upcoming tragedy. In order to maximize the startle effect when the actual murder occurs, the game will display a gruesome image—provided the player is close enough to the scene (figure 1); it also produces a horrendous scream whose overly synthetic nature only adds to the shocking effect. Similarly, in Project Firestart (Dynamix, 1989), horrific elements are presented through short cut-scenes as the player approaches; more detailed than the typically distant point of view of 2D action games, these gruesome depictions also sought to create startle effects (figure 1).

The representational economy of the graphical adventure genre always favored detailed visuals over fast manipulation of the assets and as such became an ideal format to develop the repulsive aspect of horror; notable examples include Shadow of the Comet and Prisoner

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**Figure 1:** Gruesome images in Friday the 13th (Domark, 1985) and Project Firestart (Dynamix, 1989). These short cut-scenes, which also include shocking audio elements, are inserted in the middle of a play session in order to accentuate startle effects.
of Ice (Chaosium, 1995), both inspired by the Cthulhu mythology created by H. P. Lovecraft. Building on this economy, Alone in the Dark (Infogrames, 1992) used a mix of hand-drawn backgrounds and real-time 3D characters to mimic the analytical editing of mainstream cinema. Along with Doctor Hauser (River Hill, 1994), the Alone in the Dark series influenced the look and pacing of Resident Evil to a great extent.

Despite being the only game genre to be defined with such obvious cinematographic references, survival horror also supposes specific gameplay mechanics. However, the confusion we exposed regarding the horror genre also exists with this new label. Cahiers du Cinéma’s description is somewhat hazy:

The player progresses alone in a worrisome universe. In the shadows one can feel the presence of strange creatures that can be heard before being seen; soon, zombies and other monsters will strike. Initially an adventure game located in the world of a horror movie, Survival Horror — as the name implies, it’s mainly about not dying — has slowly become a genre in itself [2002: 82, freely translated].

Bernard Perron also identifies the adventure game connection: “At the action level, in a third-person perspective, the gamer has to find clues, gather objects (you cannot do without keys) and solve puzzles” (2004). On top of the inventory system and linear puzzle-driven progression inherited from adventure games, the genre incorporates a combat element whose paradoxical nature has been underlined many times: “in the world of Survival Horror, given the limited ammunition at one’s disposal and the less than marksman-like aim of the player’s character, ‘discretion’ is frequently ‘the better part of valor’” (McRoy, 2006). If one actually brings to scrutiny these associations, however, it becomes clear that many defining features are often restricted to a specific game series and not relevant to the corpus as a whole. The first Resident Evil game indeed limits the resources such as ammunition and healing plants, but by the time the Capcom franchise reached its fourth installment, the amount of weapon-related action exceeded any big budget action blockbuster. Moreover, a skilled player in Silent Hill can accumulate a lot of ammunition and health packs. This second landmark series is associated most clearly with the relative “ordinariness” of the protagonists—an aspect that McRoy wrongfully links to a lack of shooting skills; although the same observation could be made about other games such as the Clock Tower and Fatal Frame series, it is not relevant in the case of Resident Evil, where players impersonate highly trained members of special military units. Even some first-person shooters or brawlers, such as the Condemned games by Monolith and DOOM 3 (Id Software, 2004), have been associated with survival horror. In a gesture that is highly controversial from a historical point of view, some publications even retrospectively attributed the label to older games: Gameinnovation.org
declares *Sweet Home* (Capcom, 1989)\(^{16}\) to be the first of the genre, and *Haunted House* possesses all of its characteristics according to *Gamespy.com*.\(^{17}\) Recently, Leigh Alexander — the news director for *Gamasutra*— wrote a feature entitled “Does Survival Horror Really Still Exist?”\(^{18}\) After this brief inspection of the games, one could go even further and ask: what exactly was survival horror to begin with?

The answer will not come as a surprise to anyone familiar with genre studies: as any other genre, survival horror is a concept caught up in time. The historical — more specifically, evolving — nature of genres has been acknowledged even when the urge to define stable structures still prevailed. Todorov observed that in natural sciences, the concept of genre is not fundamentally altered when a new specimen is born; evolution occurs at such a slow pace that it can be neglected more easily. In the realm of artistic practices, by contrast, “evolution operates with an altogether different rhythm: every work modifies the sum of possible works, each new example alters the species” (1973: 6). In spite of the various attempts to restrict horror to one or a combination of the three dimensions of the uncanny, the marvelous, and the fantastic, and to define survival horror according to very specific aspects, it appears that these labels have a tendency to become more inclusive than exclusive. One could say that the academic efforts to clearly define these objects actually go against the natural fluctuations of concepts that are often put forward by the production pole — as in the case of survival horror — and reappropriated by a community of receptors that range from critics to casual players. In this exchange, which is not always concerned with the clarity of generic definitions, it is likely that any novel, movie or game that evokes a strong experience of fear or related emotional states (apprehension, anxiety, alarm, terror, despair) will become associated with the horror or survival horror genre.\(^{19}\) Is the only purpose of genre studies to refine definitions and “canonize” specific traits in order to clear-up “wrong” genre associations?

Instead of perpetuating what Hans Robert Jauss has called the substantialist approach (1986), whose rigid definitions only serve classificatory purposes at best, genre studies should strive to develop analytic tools that can account for the evolution of the concepts it seeks to understand.

*Caught Up in History*

Designing comparative tools to better understand the evolution of a genre is a complex endeavor. For instance, such tools became a preoccupation during Bernard Perron’s funded research project on interactive cinema. The *Ludiciné* online database (www.ludicine.ca), conceived in the course of this project, integrated a complex taxonomy in order to categorize all the rel-
event objects through a systematic terminology, pertaining to various dimensions ranging from technical aspects to interactive design. Developing a simple, yet precise descriptor system to account for the gameplay experience was one of the biggest challenges faced by the Ludiciné team. It became obvious early on that relying on existing generic labels would not allow a clear description of the interactive encounter. As we have seen, genre labels can be loosely defined and information about a specific game can vary greatly from one database to the next. Even if such a stable genre typology existed, many games stray from acknowledged formulas by integrating gameplay elements from other genres or by simplifying typical game mechanics. It was decided to define gameplay components based on the imaginary represented actions performed by the player in the virtual world; these components are referred to as “figures of interactivity.” Interactive cinema, which encompasses experiments in theatres, artistic works on various formats (installations, CD-ROM), and video games integrating live-action video, share many figures of interactivity with the later form such as “conversation,” “spatial exploration” and “shooting.” The research also uncovered very specific figures such as mediated forms of editing—spatial, temporal, and rhythmic (see Perron & Therrien, 2007, and Perron, Arsenault, Picard and Therrien, 2008). Similarly, understanding how horror video games integrated and modified pre-existing figures of interactivity, and which figures came to be associated with the genre, constitutes an interesting way to study the phenomenon.

Even though many survival horror games involve combat, the first Resident Evil clearly directed players to adopt a new attitude towards confrontation: “Be smart! Fighting foes is not the only way to survive this horror” reads an introductory screen before the self-running demo. Indeed, if players empty their pistol clip on the first zombie they encounter instead of fleeing, their chances of survival is quite limited considering the scarcity of ammunition to be found early on. For all the incongruities and arbitrary conventions of the game, it is at least consistent in that players can even flee some boss encounters. It is interesting to note that “flight” is actually quite a prevalent action in many horror-themed games. In The Lurking Horror, the only way to survive an onslaught of rats in the steam tunnels underneath the aeronautic engineering building is to flee back and break a pipe to chase the vermin with steam. In the second stage of Akumajo Dracula X: Chi No Rondo, a behemoth suddenly bursts in and starts chasing the player’s avatar, Richter Belmont (figure 2). One of the most terrifying moments in Fatal Frame II: Crimson Butterfly (Tecmo, 2003) comes when Mio looses the camera obscura, her only weapon against the spectral apparitions; for a good part of chapter 7, players have no choice but to flee from Sae, a particularly deadly ghost. Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth (Headfirst, 2005) proposes many lengthy, obstacle-laden chase sequences in the troubled Lovecraftian little
town of Innsmouth. *Parasite Eve* (1998) comes from the same team that brought us *Final Fantasy VII* (1997) at Squa Soft—a franchise and company that became emblematic of Japanese role-playing games at turn-based, menu-driven combat; for this sci-horror RPG, the team privileged a hybrid combat system that puts all of emphasis on dodging the minions’ attacks (figure 2). Last but not least, escaping the scissor man in *Clock Tower* is one of the major components of the game; Jennifer has to run from room to room, where few hiding spots will actually fool the stalker.

The scarcity of offensive resources is interconnected with another common figure in horror video games: management. In a context where ammunition is hard to find, players are more likely to use these resources very carefully, take the time to aim properly, and salvage more powerful weapons for the most terrifying encounters. In *Condemned: Criminal Origins*, it is impossible to carry more than one weapon at any given time, and firearms are hard to come by; once they put their hands on a .45 pistol or a sawed-off shotgun, players can either empty their charger immediately and then rely on melee weapons, or use the firearm itself as a melee weapon in order to save ammunition. The scarcity of resources thus
favors a potentially more methodical attitude with regards to fighting or shooting mechanics. However, “management” takes on a very literal meaning in games where the avatar can gather resources in an “inventory” whose space is restricted. In the first Resident Evil, each weapon, ammunition clip, healing herb and puzzle-related item takes up one square in an inventory system that comprise no more than six or eight, depending on the avatar selected at the beginning of the game. In 1981, Haunted House already proposed a restrictive inventory system. Even The Lurking Horror, a text-adventure game, made inventory management an integral part of the experience. In a world where many useless objects could be gathered, the nameless G.U.E Tech student that players guide can only carry so much; the amount that can be carried actually depends on an implicit strength attribute that the player can restore by drinking cola.

In some horror games, actions such as combat and flight are integrated in a broader system pertaining to the sanity of the protagonist, who is typically defined by a health capital in most action games. A variety of meters and signs indicate this relative sanity, thus having players adopt an attitude of “psychological monitoring.” In Friday the 13th, the expression of your avatar — which is constantly shown in close-up at the bottom of the screen — becomes progressively aggravated as Jason kills your friends one by one. The failing sanity of your avatar, however, doesn’t have any real implications or consequences on the gameplay. The original Clock Tower on Super Famicom proposes a similar meter at the bottom of the screen where the strength of the protagonist, Jennifer, is color-coded from blue (maximum strength) to red (minimum strength). Strength in this case is directly linked to a psychological aspect: it will deplete when Jennifer is faced with stressful situations (such as a confrontation with the scissor man). Once the meter reaches red, the avatar is more likely to lack the physical/psychological strength to escape danger, no matter how fast the player taps on the “panic” button (figure 3). It is Silicon Knights’ Eternal Darkness. Sanity’s Requiem (2002) that thoroughly developed the concept of psychological well-being in a game. Here the sanity meter is a purely conventional green line that will deplete when any of the twelve characters to be controlled by the player faces a frightening element, most notably the many skeletons and zombies that populate each of the game’s settings. Before the player can regain sanity, typically by finishing off the wounded monsters, the game will introduce a series of increasingly disturbing effects that can hinder gameplay in many ways: camera angles become more oblique; sound effects are covered by lingering low tones, frightened whispers and sobbing; sudden decapitation of the protagonists and modification of rooms’ proportions are revealed to be hallucinatory sequences; etc. Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth seeks to create similar effects in first-person mode: when players gaze on horrific elements
or when they are chased by an angry mob, intrusive trailing and blurry effects will permeate the point of view; if the threatening situation is not escaped in due time the protagonist might as far as to commit suicide! On top of the rhythmic “Simon-say” segments, \textit{Indigo Prophecy} (Quantic Dream, 2005) makes sanity a decisive factor to progress in the game: if the meter is depleted, the game is over (figure 3).

In the realm of horror games, the study of specific figures of interactivity is faced with a challenge that didn’t surface as clearly for the study of interactive cinema. Whereas the integration of live-action video favored simple interactive design throughout the corpus, horror video games range from the early days to the most complex contemporary productions (\textit{Dead Space}, EA Redwood Shores, 2008) and consequently, the complexity of control methods vary greatly from game to game. “Flight” is really not experienced in the same way in a lateral 2D game (\textit{Clock Tower}) as it is in a first-person “square-by-square” exploration game (\textit{Waxworks}, HorrorSoft, 1992); similar observations could be made about fighting and shooting experiences. Are there gameplay design choices that clearly differ-

\textbf{Figure 3:} Stressful situations have a direct impact on Jennifer's psychological well being in \textit{Clock Tower} (Human Entertainment, 1995); In \textit{Indigo Prophecy} (Quantic Dream, 2005), the sanity of your avatar is a decisive element to progress in the game.


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